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# The Poet of Autonomy: Antonio Negri As a Social Theorist

by Raewyn Connell

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## Introduction

Antonio Negri was perhaps the most brilliant theorist produced by the European and North American New Left in the 1960s and 1970s. He is now, on the strength of books published since he turned sixty, internationally famous, and one of the most influential analysts of global power. His joint book *Empire* stirred huge debate, being fiercely attacked by orthodox Marxists and neo-conservatives, while enthusiastically embraced in the anti-globalization movement. Sober critics were moved to declare: “despite its weaknesses, this is a highly innovative and often brilliantly perceptive work on the contemporary world order” [Green 2002, 69; for other valuable assessments see Bencivenni 2006; Sprague 2011; Thompson 2005].

Negri has produced work of tremendous scope, ranging from legal theory (his original field) to the tactics of industrial struggle, from studies of Spinoza and Marx’s *Grundrisse* to contemporary politics and social change. He has a truly impressive capacity for synthesis, for finding deep patterns that link these disparate themes, and his work is wonderfully suggestive on many issues. Not all of his links work. As many have argued, he does make false moves, and leaves large gaps in his picture of the world.

In this paper I explore the aspect of Negri’s work that has been underplayed in the controversies, yet is arguably the most important key to its political value: the social theory it contains. I will try to specify the main ideas Negri offers about

contemporary world society and its dynamics, explore the sources of those ideas, and offer an evaluation.

Appropriately, this paper began in a controversy. Several years after the publication of *Empire*, Negri was invited to give the keynote speech at a conference at the University of Sydney. Reviving charges from the 1970s, the right-wing Murdoch press – which controls most of Australia’s print media – called Negri an apologist for terrorism and attacked the University of Sydney for inviting him. The speech was cancelled, and a local controversy arose as to whether Negri had been censored, or was simply ill. To vindicate the invitation, I gave a public lecture about Negri’s work, in a series sponsored by the University. The lecture was published in the Australian literary journal *Overland*, and this paper develops its ideas.

## **The Picture of Empire**

In a long essay on materialism written in the late 1990s [Negri 2003], and in three sprawling books written collaboratively with the US literary theorist Michael Hardt, *Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth* [Hardt and Negri 2000; Hardt and Negri 2004; Hardt and Negri 2009], Negri sets out a distinctive analysis of power and possibility in global society. (Hardt undoubtedly played a large part in producing these texts and expanding Negri’s knowledge of US politics, history, and intellectual life. Nevertheless it is clear that the basic analysis is Negri’s, so I will refer to Negri as the author of the social theory in these books).

Negri describes a power structure that operates on a world scale, but has no directing centre. The accumulation of power is greater than it has ever been, yet sovereignty has been dispersed. Modern capitalism has produced a strange political order, quite different from the “imperialism” of the nineteenth century – hence Negri uses the old-fashioned term “empire.” There are levels in this power structure, and “apexes and summits of imperial power” [Hardt and Negri 2000, 355], particularly the US state and its nuclear armaments. Yet this eminence, even its universal nuclear death threat, does not give the US government the capacity to administer the world, and this is proved by the failure of the neo-conservative strategy under George W. Bush. Sovereign power is widely dispersed in network fashion, according to *Empire*, though *Commonwealth* give a somewhat lumpier picture of a global “aristocracy” on top of various pyramids of power, whether states or corporations. Consistently, though, it is argued that the strongest centres can, at best, conduct police operations and need help from other parts of the network.

At the same time Empire has become, in a certain sense, total. There is no “outside” to the system, for instance no transcendent ethical standpoint from which its operations can be effectively criticised. There are echoes of Foucault here, but Negri’s model is not one of universal capillary power, or postmodern fragmentation. The dispersed sovereignty of Empire is still a system of domination, quite specifically of capitalist domination. “In Empire capital and sovereignty tend to overlap completely” [Hardt and Negri 2004, 334]. It is a system designed to maintain exploitation and the accumulation of wealth globally in the hands of the privileged few.

Such a system has to be violent, hard-headed and ruthless. *Empire* was published before the 9/11 atrocity, but the model has no difficulty accounting for the US response to the attack, and for the subsequent atrocities against Afghanistan and Iraq. *Multitude* argues that war, the extreme expression of the violence of the system, has become endemic and indeed necessary to the global order. “Military force must guarantee the conditions for the functioning of the world market” [*ibidem*, 21, 90, 177].

Empire is a system of domination produced by rupture from earlier systems of domination – from traditional imperialism and from the disciplinary society of modernity. Negri sometimes speaks of the emergence of a “society of control.” The new society is marked by hybrid forms of rule, cobbled together to deal ad hoc with urgent problems (e.g. private police, “public-private partnerships,” puppet governments). There is no overall system, orderliness, in the global exercise of power. But there is an overall character to it:

In Empire corruption is everywhere... It resides in different forms in the supreme government of Empire and its vassal administrations, the most refined and the most rotten administrative police forces, the lobbies of the ruling classes, the mafias of rising social groups...the great financial conglomerates, and everyday economic transactions. Through corruption, imperial power extends a smoke screen across the world, and command over the multitude is exercised in this putrid cloud, in the absence of light and truth [Hardt and Negri 2000, 389].

Corruption expresses the arbitrariness of a power which has no rationale, no justification, except the maintenance of domination itself.

Empire is a new form of the state; but it is a state that has achieved an eerie autonomy from society. Negri suggests that the mediations are dying, that civil society – far from flourishing in globalization, as optimists like Beck [1999] and Giddens [2002] think – is withering away. The established institutions of modern society (school, family, hospital, factory etc.) “are everywhere in crisis” [Hardt and Negri 2000, 329], endemically corrupted. In their place arises a society of control centering on a strong state. Negri has no patience with social-democratic wailing about the

decline of the state under globalization. In his view, big government has never gone away. It has, however, changed its focus – from economic planning to social control, the mobilization of force, “security.” The inherent violence of capitalist power is more and more clearly revealed.

As a good Marxist, Negri sees an economic rationale (he never speaks of an “economic base,” for reasons that will become clear) in this political order. Empire is capitalist power being exerted over a new system of production. Adapting language from Foucault, Negri speaks of “biopolitical production.” This means that capitalist exploitation has stretched its scope, from the simple making of commodities in the traditional factory, to the making of the whole pattern of life. Adapting language from Marx, he speaks of the “real subsumption” of society under capital, which involves a historically new pattern of exploitation:

But today, in the paradigm of immaterial production, the theory of value cannot be conceived in terms of measured quantities of time, and so exploitation cannot be understood in these terms. Just as we must understand the production of value in terms of the common, so too must we try to conceive exploitation as *the expropriation of the common* [Hardt and Negri 2004, 150].

“Immaterial production” refers to new forms of labour, centering on the exchange of information and on human emotion, that have displaced the old. Here Negri draws on recent discussions of computerization, the “information society,” the service economy and emotion work, to draw a picture of the emergence of a new type of worker who is the key to contemporary social change. “Immaterial labor has become *hegemonic in qualitative terms* and has imposed a tendency on other forms of labor and society itself” [*ibidem*, 109].

Almost alone among theorists of globalization, Negri does not see the creation of global society as a process driven from the top. Exactly the opposite. He argues that the new forms of rule, and of global economic organization, are *reactive*. They are the responses of capital to pressure from below.

There is no other way it could be, because capital is not in itself creative. Negri goes to some length, in his philosophical work, to emphasise the unique creativity of *labour*, poetically described as “the power to create being where there is only the void” [Negri 2003, 242]. In biopolitical production, this creativity can be seen across the whole terrain of human life, uniting the formerly separate terrains of social reproduction and material production. In earlier phases, the capitalist at least could be said to do hands-on organizing of some of this labour (the iron master in his factory). Now, capital simply exercises control from a distance (the billionaire at Palm Beach). Capital has become wholly parasitical on its labour force.

But the labour force is not passive. This is the crucial point in Negri's argument. The labour force – which in biopolitical production is very extensive and diverse – is a seething mass of resistance to the control that capital attempts to exert. The resistance, consistent with the creativity of labour, takes a tremendous variety of forms. Negri mentions some of them, from workplace struggles to anticolonial wars to uncontrolled labour migration, noting both the continuity with earlier forms of working-class struggle and the emergence of new figures of resistance such as the Zapatistas.

But these are only a few cases. More fundamentally, Negri emphasises the endless, un-analyzable diversity of the new forms of life thrown up in the course of struggles against control. From the point of view of modernity, many of these forms of life seem strange, even monstrous; and Empire does its best to pathologise and police them. But resistance is necessarily lived as alterity, otherness, as the *refusal* of capitalist social relations and the creation of other ways of life.

Here, Negri speaks of the “self-valorization” involved in proletarian struggle. By this he means the creation of a life fundamentally *separate* from the set of social relations (including valorization through labour market exchange) that capital attempts to impose. Negri thus argues that we are living in a society not tending to polarize, as in old Marxist models and current discussions of inequality. It is a society *already* dichotomous, in its basic processes. The global capitalist state and the capitalist corporations sit on top of a population which is always escaping their control, always creating new forms of life, and which basically does not need them.

But the underlying population is not what it used to be. “Exploitation can no longer be localized and quantified” [Hardt and Negri 2000, 209]. In the trilogy *Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth* Negri adopts a kind of postmodernity thesis (though preferring the term “altermodernity”) and argues that the old class structure and the old class dynamics have gone. The dialectic has been broken; we are in a new logic of history. (Complaints by orthodox Marxists that Negri is not properly dialectical consistently miss this point.) And with it, into the dustbin of history go all the strategies that ever tried to plan the transition to socialism, or to unify the proletariat around the industrial worker or the militant peasant, or under the leadership of a vanguard party, or behind the new working class. A revolution in the revolution, indeed.

Instead of growing class homogeneity, Negri posits endless and irreducible diversity. Here he is strongly influenced by Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, though the term he uses, “multitude,” comes from Spinoza. “The postmodern multitude is an ensemble of singularities” [Negri 2003, 225]. Rather than seeing diversity as an obstacle to class mobilization, Negri sees it as the very tissue of resistance, something to celebrate, a feature of democratic action in the postmodern world.

“Multitude” in Negri’s usage is not a descriptive sociological term – he is not offering it as the name for a new transnational working class. Formally he uses the old-fashioned term “proletariat” for this – “in conceptual terms we understand *proletariat* as a broad category that includes all those whose labor is directly or indirectly exploited by and subjected to capitalist norms of production and reproduction” [Hardt and Negri 2000, 52]. “Multitude” is a more dynamic concept, referring to a new *composition* of the proletariat, a new pattern of resistance to capital, a new configuration of social struggles. The crucial point about it is an absolute separation from capital, a direct, unmediated otherness: “within the context of the sovereign organization of globality, Empire is directly confronted by the multitude, and the multitude by Empire. In this context, all mediations tend to disintegrate” [Negri 2003, 229].

In this configuration, reflecting the many singularities, there is no vanguard group, no master strategy, and there cannot possibly be one. Rather, there is a tremendous many-sided outpouring of creativity and resistance around the world, shapeless and uncontrollable, separating itself all the time from the norms of capitalist social relations. “The forms of rebellion are multiple” [*ibidem*, 258].

The resistance of the multitude is uncontrollable partly because it is shapeless, but more fundamentally because resistance is the other side of the creativity of living labour. Since capital absolutely depends on living labour, it can never get rid of the resistance, and it cannot overcome the separation. Capital does not choose its own isolation – it is driven into it. That is the contradiction in which Empire finds itself, and which will ultimately destroy it.

Within the resistance, within the present activity of the multitude, Negri finds the outline of something that can replace Empire, indeed capitalism itself. Creative labour, especially the newly emergent patterns of biopolitical labour based on intellect and affect, construct forms of social solidarity and decision-making among the proletariat. The emerging forms of life that are the process of self-valorization constitute commons that cannot be expropriated or mediated, that are inherently, directly, democratic. At a very fundamental level, this expresses the human capacity for love.

Here is the strong novelty of militancy today: it repeats the virtues of insurrectional action of two hundred years of subversive experience, but at the same time it is linked to a new world, a world that knows no outside... This inside is the productive cooperation of mass intellectuality and affective networks, the productivity of post-modern biopolitics. This militancy makes resistance into counterpower and makes rebellion into a project of love [Hardt and Negri 2000, 413].

In the capacity of the multitude to create new democratic forms of life, Negri finds the basis of a constituent power that contests Empire, and is capable of taking the revolutionary leap beyond capitalism into a world of cooperative labour and

universal freedom. This will not be achieved just by sweetness and light. Capitalist power opposes all these processes with violence, and the movements of resistance and transformation must be prepared to use force themselves – as, indeed, many of them do. The process is a social revolution. In *Commonwealth* the authors grapple with the question of how a focused revolution can arise from inchoate resistance, how the revolution can be “governed,” and on this rather troubled theme, the trilogy comes to an end.

There are other themes in the trilogy and in *Time for Revolution*, including the concept of love and the different forms of time. These books are peppered with entertaining and annoying excursions on a wild array of topics ranging from vampires, insect swarms and tourism to Dostoyevsky, the US founding fathers, and Machiavelli. However the arguments outlined above are, I think, the main points in Negri’s theorization of contemporary society and its processes of change. It is perhaps the most dynamic theory of globalization we have, and the most optimistic – despite its black picture of exploitation, violence and corruption.

### **The Background: Militancy, Autonomy, and Prison**

Though Negri’s earlier work was largely ignored in the English-language controversy over *Empire*, a few commentators did point to his involvement in Italian *operaismo* and the *autonomia* movement [see e.g. Thoburn 2001; Wright 2002; Bowring 2004; Gill and Pratt 2008]. I think it is crucial to consider this background, because some of his central ideas arose in a context very different from the later debates over globalisation.

Negri came of age politically in a country dominated by conservative, corrupt Christian Democrat governments that were cold-war allies of the USA and internal allies of the church, the mafia, and big capital. The main left-wing alternative was the Communist Party (PCI) who, as part of Stalin’s spheres-of-influence deal with Roosevelt in 1944-45, had called off the social revolution under way in northern Italy at the end of the war, and settled down to life as a loyal opposition. The PCI held municipal power in a number of cities and controlled the largest part of the union movement, but had no strategy of social mobilization and saw socialism as a very distant prospect. Meanwhile the Marshall plan triggered a very rapid export-led industrialization, mainly in the North – Italian GNP grew at more than 5% per annum through the 1950s, one of the fastest growth rates in the world. Huge internal migration created new labour forces exposed for the first time to factory discipline, and began to overwhelm urban services, housing, and social welfare in Turin, Milan,



Rome, and in the Veneto. The result was growing social turbulence which erupted in mass protests through the 1960s, outside the official political system.

Negri trained in philosophy and law and launched a stellar academic career, qualifying as a university teacher in 1959 and becoming a professor of law in his hometown Padua in 1967. He began his political life in the Catholic youth movement, leaving when the Pope of the day purged its radicals; moved to the Socialist Party, leaving when the Socialists did a deal with the Christian Democrats to enter government. In the early 1960s he connected with other Marxist intellectuals who were looking for a radical path in politics. The most influential was Mario Tronti, whose 1966 book *Operai e capitale* is a foundational statement for a whole European movement to re-value working class experience and activism. With Tronti and others, Negri edited the very influential journal *Quaderni rossi*, and then *Classe operaia*, their ideas spreading through the growing Italian new left. Negri did hands-on organizing in the new factory communities in his region, as well as developing a radical intellectual centre at the University of Padua. When the social explosions of 1968-69 arrived, to an unusual extent the Italian student movement and workers' movement developed together. The mainstream parties and unions were left flat-footed by a huge surge of social activism.

At this time Negri became a central figure in the group *Potere operaio*, which emphasised factory-based mass action for social goals. Important gains in wages and conditions were won by direct action – the strategy seemed to be working. Negri began writing a series of essays on the state and on strategy for subverting capitalist control. But the new left could not hold together. Some thought the new militancy could transform the mass parties (Tronti joined the PCI). Others thought the spontaneous mass movement should evolve into an insurrectionary vanguard party on a Leninist or Maoist model. *Potere operaio* split over this issue and collapsed in 1973. An autonomous women's movement arose and began its own struggles against state and church, winning a national referendum on divorce. Some left groups, including the newspaper *Lotta continua*, survived, but a widespread fragmentation seems to have occurred. From the fragments emerged small urban guerilla groups who regarded themselves as an armed vanguard. Meanwhile the PCI did its own deal with the Christian Democrats, the "historic compromise" which gave it a share of central state power and allowed a national austerity program to be introduced.

Negri stuck with the model of decentralized mass action, which crystallized in the mid 1970s as the *Autonomia* movement. He intensified his theoretical work, now emphasising links between the factory and the wider working class and new social movements. Again his position was vindicated. Renewed factory activism, a

youth movement, a student movement, free radio, housing occupations, the new feminism, all seemed to follow a strategy of direct action to create a liberated way of life outside mainstream institutions. In 1977 they erupted in another surge of social protest, forcible factory occupations, university occupations, battles with police, and rejection of the austerity program. Negri had his first experience of arrest and exile. In the same year his theoretical masterpiece, *La forma stato*, was released by Feltrinelli, for whom he had edited a series of Marxist texts. In January 1978 Feltrinelli published Negri's most apocalyptic work, *Il dominio e il sabotaggio*. Both books included bitter criticism of the PCI, and both predicted growing class antagonism and the overthrow of the system. The final chapter of *Il dominio e il sabotaggio* is titled "... and the proletarians attack heaven."

By this time the Italian political establishment, right and left, was more than alarmed. When the red brigades, in March 1978, kidnapped and later killed Aldo Moro, the regime got the backing it needed for a strategy of outright repression. In April 1979 the leading figures of the *Autonomia* network, and others who had been in *Potere operaio*, were arrested. Negri was accused by the media of being "the brain behind the red brigades," an "evil teacher" corrupting youth, and was actually charged with the Moro murder as well as other crimes of violence. He was thrown into prison, and though the terrorism charges were dropped he was sentenced to 30 years. In a startling turn in 1983, Negri was nominated for parliament by the Radical Party, and was elected. But when the parliament voted to strip Negri of his immunity and send him back to prison, he very reasonably feared for his life, and fled the country.

For the next fourteen years Negri lived in France. He worked as an academic in Paris, keeping a low profile politically because of his insecure residence rights as a refugee. Negri became part of the Paris intellectual scene, working especially with Félix Guattari, absorbed the work of the French post-structuralists, launched a new journal, and in the early 1990s began the collaboration with Michael Hardt that led to the trilogy.

In 1997, at the age of sixty-four, Negri returned to Italy. It seems that he hoped to broker an amnesty for the autonomists who were still in jail, but if so, the deal failed. He was sent back to prison, and was still there when *Empire* was published in the USA by that well-known leftist firm, Harvard University Press, and made him world-famous. Negri served out his term, with conventional remissions, being finally released in 2003. Since then he has travelled, written, and taught again in Paris.

## **The First Phase of Negri's Social Thought: State Power, Neoliberalism, The Working Class, and Sabotage**

The intellectual work of Negri's earlier period – not exactly his youth, he was in his mid-forties when arrested – starts with a commitment to Marxism, but also to a re-reading of Marx. This reading rejected the mechanical sociology of historical materialism (base, superstructure, modes of production, etc.). It saw Marxism as above all a theory of immediate social struggle, demanding a fresh intellectual approach.

This was common ground in the *Quaderni rossi* group. Also common ground was the idea that it is the workers's struggle, not the will of the capitalists, that drives the development of capitalism. As Tronti put it in a celebrated essay from 1964,

the point of departure for the new approach is the idea that, at the national and the international level, it is the specific current political situation of the working class that guides and impels a certain pattern of development for capital. In the light of this principle we must now create a new understanding of the entire world network of social relations [Tronti 1971, 90].

That is what Negri proceeded to do. He insisted (and was still insisting forty years later in *Commonwealth*) that to be a Marxist demands re-thinking Marx's ideas in the light of experience, and where necessary abandoning them. By the mid-1970s he was forcibly arguing that the workers's struggle itself had made some of Marx's basic concepts obsolete. This did not endear him to the orthodox.

Negri's first distinctive contribution was to apply Tronti's principle to the Keynesian state. In a brilliant essay of 1967, Negri showed how the growth of working-class power in Europe drove the development of Keynes's economic thought and even shaped the fundamental ideas of the *General Theory*. For instance the balance of class power, especially the working-class capacity to impose a downward rigidity of wages, underpinned Keynes's vital category of "effective demand." Similarly the imperatives of class politics underlay Keynes's apparently technical exercise in reinstating equilibrium, subordinating interest rates to the marginal efficiency of capital in order to produce full employment. Keynes produced the strategy by which the state could internalize working-class pressure and turn it to the ends of capitalist development.

In the following years Negri traced the development of this "planning-state" (roughly, the welfare state plus macroeconomic planning plus incomes policy) as a capitalist response to working-class pressure. He then, in a key text of 1971 later published as *Crisi dello Stato-piano*, diagnosed the disruption of the planning-state and the emergence of a "crisis-state" or "enterprise-state."

Why does the capitalist state mutate into these forms? Basically, Negri argues, because working-class struggle damages the underlying *economic* mechanisms of the capitalist system. Negri puts this in Marxist language by saying that working-class struggle destroys the “law of value” that governs exchange in the labour market (in Marxist terms, the purchase of labour-power) and thus the distribution of income. More broadly (Negri goes into considerable detail here about economic cycles, inflation and public finance) working-class pressure tends to disrupt or constrain all the mechanisms of the circulation of capital, and thus prevents the capitalist economy working as an automatic, self-regulating system. Capitalism is, in another characteristic phrase of Negri’s, de-structured or de-composed by struggle.

Capital responds by an extension of state power, which through planning apparently restores market relations. Again Negri goes into considerable detail about how this happened, analyzing the US New Deal as well as the European postwar planning-state. This view is not unlike other Marxist theories of the state, though Negri’s economic argument is more specific than most. Where Negri differs from conventional theories is his insistence that the solution via the state is extremely unstable.

The factory subordinated itself to the state, which guaranteed the fundamental conditions of the system’s functioning – and of the factory system in the first place. Via the state, exchange-value found a guarantee for operating as the general law of reproduction of the conditions of production. But this mechanism has not functioned. It has been destroyed, starting with the factory and ending by embracing the whole society... [Negri 1974, 32].

With the law of value in tatters, there is no *rational* basis for any distribution of income that the state decrees (this important conclusion was reached about the same time, along a different path, by Claus Offe in Germany.) The exercise of state power becomes fundamentally arbitrary. In Negri’s language, the planning-state increasingly becomes a system of contentless command. Its function now is essentially a police function. It seeks ways of dividing the working class and disrupting the struggles that are de-structuring the system. The state loses legitimacy and lurches into crisis.

When working-class pressure makes the economy under the planning-state unworkable – Negri is now talking about the stagnation and fiscal crisis emerging in the early 1970s – capital is forced to try another tack. The pressure can only be relieved “within a project that is qualitatively different from that of reformist planning” [Red Notes 1979, 34]. This new political project involves the separation of production from circulation, the creation of a “productive subject” who does not act collectively, a new capitalist strategy for the labour market, and globalization.

Here Negri is, in short, analyzing the strategy of neo-liberalism in response to the crisis of the Keynesian welfare state. It is worth noting that these texts were

written in 1973, long before Thatcher, Reagan, or Berlusconi came to power or the World Bank and IMF turned to structural adjustment programmes.

In later analyses of the neo-liberal strategy, Negri [1988, 183; a text written in 1980] emphasised that entrepreneurialism and the celebration of freedom go together with authoritarianism and increases in the coercive power of the state. He also observed how the neo-liberal strategy works by the exclusion, rather than the representation, of social forces. Unions and mass parties are sidelined, industrial bargaining declines. The inclusive strategy of the Keynesian era is reversed, so state and capital tend to function in a social vacuum [Hardt and Negri 1994, ch. 6]. Here too, Negri very early detected patterns that have since become globally familiar.

At the same time, to counter the collapsing rate of profit, capital is forced to extend its economic operations beyond the factory to the whole terrain of social production. To counter working-class struggle on that wider terrain, capital is forced to extend the technique of factory command to the whole of society. Civil society dies, and with it all possibility of Gramscian hegemony.

In a startling reversal, Negri [1977, 245] argued in *La forma stato*, “to the state, accumulation; to the enterprise, legitimation, the carrying of consensus.” Productivity becomes the only basis of legitimacy. (This was a trend that proved formative for neo-liberal “enterprise culture” in the 1980s and after.) Meanwhile the state, as a system of contentless command, relies more and more heavily on the use of force. The cycles of the capitalist economy “can now only function if reinforced by a surplus of power” [*ibidem*, 228]. In enforcing capitalist command, “administrative rationality does not become terror, it is terror. Remove from capitalist society its only rationality, which is grounded in the lust for exploitation: you have this baroque monster of provocation and devastation” [*ibidem*, 259].

Disrupting proletarian movements, establishing total control, and enforcing the norms of business – “this is ‘good government’ today” [*ibidem*, 248]. These words were written in 1975. Negri and his colleagues may have been taken tactically unaware, but conceptually he did predict quite well what good government in the Italian style was to do, four years later.

All of these developments come about, ultimately, because of pressure from the working class. In orthodox Marxism, “working class” had become a completely static category. The *Quaderni rossi* group transformed class theory, emphasising the generative power of the working class and developing the concept of the changing “class composition” of the proletariat. This offered an alternative to the Gramscian concept of “hegemony,” and seemed very much in line with the new working-class history of E.P.Thompson [1963] and others.

Negri developed these ideas, in the wake of the 1968-69 surge of militancy, into a dramatic theory of class transformations. Classical socialism had been based on a working-class where the central role was played by skilled workers organized in trades. But during the twentieth century industry was transformed (Gramsci's Fordism) and the central place was taken by the "mass worker" of the new mass-production industrial economy.

While traditional communist and socialist parties watched uncomprehendingly, entirely new forms of revolutionary struggle emerged, centered in the factories. The mass worker became politicized around new demands, for instance equal wages for everybody, and issues of industrial safety (a particular concern of Negri's organizing work). Most importantly, the power of the mass worker directly challenged capitalist command, both in the factory and in the wider society. It was this challenge, fundamentally, that disrupted the planning-state and forced capitalism down a new path.

The new path involved a second transformation of the working class, which I have already mentioned. Through the 1970s Negri increasingly emphasised that contemporary capital depended on exploiting social production as a whole. This implied the growing economic importance of workers beyond the big factories – "the social majority of the working class," including those involved in domestic labour and service work. In a text of 1982 Negri systematised these ideas, speaking of a historic transition from the "mass worker" to "the social worker" as the new class subject. (Translating such a phrase is not easy: it refers to the diverse groups engaged in "socialized labour" across the whole terrain of production and social reproduction).

Militancy and direct action were now emerging on this new terrain, and the working class was being re-composed. New demands became politically central, especially those concerned with the social wage, i.e. public spending – a sharp issue in the days of the "austerity" program. This might sound like a recipe for compromise, especially after the disintegration of the Italian left in the early 1970s. But in Negri's eyes the re-composed working class was no less militant than the mass worker, and no more integrated into capitalism. Building on Tronti's concept of the working-class "refusal" of the capitalist system, on the direct-action approach of the new left internationally, and on the specific experiences of industrial and community militancy in Italy, Negri developed a striking theory of working-class struggle.

Where previous forms of socialism had valorized work (as illustrated by trade union banners proclaiming the dignity of labour), modern proletarian struggle centres on the *refusal of work* (e.g. reducing work hours, slowing line speeds, or simply being absent). Proletarian struggle now involves the disruption of capitalist command (e.g. factory occupations), the direct appropriation of the products of labour, and the fulfillment of social needs (e.g. housing occupations, free public transport).

“Autonomy” was a word with multiple meanings at the time, but it did capture this idea of ongoing *separation* from the capitalist system. Here Negri was furthest from new-left theorizing in other countries, which tended to emphasise the *integration* of the working class in advanced capitalism. [I have to declare an interest, as I was one of those arguing the integration thesis: Connell 1977, ch. 10.]

Negri drew these threads together in the concept of “self-valorisation” [*autovalorizzazione*: see especially Negri 1977, ch. 10]. With the disruption of the capitalist circuits that had defined the value of labour-power, it was open to the working class to give their own value to their own labour. They could turn their energy to the reproduction of their own lives. Negri saw this as the common theme in all the social struggles that had emerged after 1968. He therefore interpreted self-valorization as implying the immediate realization of “communism,” the new society where labour was at last free: “Proletarians are sick of producing, through their struggle, the bosses’s machinery; here they produce for themselves, according to the measure of non-work and with the method of social transformation” [Negri 1978, 53].

Here was no laborious Marxist scheme of transition between modes of production, and no role for an orthodox party. The militant working class was in effect its own party, and communism was an “active force” here and now, not pie in the sky. Negri’s argument immediately linked the process of self-valorization and political organization for revolution [Negri 1977, 334ff.].

But every step of self-valorization was at the same time a rupture with capitalist command, a step in the de-structuring of capital. Therefore, as Negri eventually put it, every form of struggle constituted *sabotage* of the system. The stories of the capitalist class and the working class were linked, but not in a dialectic as reformism presumed. They were linked by an irreconcilable antagonism, resulting in a growing separation. The movement rejected the traditional identity of labour created by capitalism and reformism; Negri [1978, 47] quoted an unexpected passage of Shakespeare: “We are all bastards.” Only one course for working-class militancy was now open: a leap into the future, “the proletarians attack heaven.” In a context of widening social struggle, Negri saw power shifting towards the working class, with an immediate possibility of social revolution.

As we know, it did not happen. The capitalists saw the sabotage, the parties saw the threat to their existence, terrorism by the red brigades gave the excuse, and the movement was crushed. Negri’s writings could readily be interpreted as incitement to insurrection, because that is what they were – *assuming a social revolution*. Negri supported revolutionary violence in the context of mass actions confronting a violent state and capitalist command. For instance, in the 1973 essay “The workers’s party of Mirafiori” [Red Notes 1979], he presented armed factory occupations as a decisive

step forward in class struggle. It was entirely consistent with this view to reject the terrorism of groups that were trying to *substitute* themselves for the working class and operate as a clandestine elite.

### **Critique of the Social Analysis**

It will be clear that some of the most distinctive and illuminating ideas in Negri's analysis of contemporary global power come from his earlier theorizing. Some of the difficulties in *Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth* also have deep roots in the early work. I will explore four problems in particular, which show the limits of Negri's social theorizing.

The first has to do with the gendered character of his thought. Feminist readers easily recognize an all-too-familiar problem with a male leftist, the absence of gender analysis [Schultz 2006; Hawkesworth 2006]. Negri pays little attention to gender, generation or sexuality. He does not begin to theorize the relationship of sexuality to power, as Reich, Marcuse, and Gay Liberation did. In Negri's earlier writings about "social production" there were some invocations of women's domestic labour (not men's). In the later writings he and Hardt, while making a tour of fashionable radicalisms, cite some feminist work. They endorse US deconstructionist feminism and queer theory – and dismiss the rest of world feminism as not properly revolutionary.

Negri never conceptually addresses the changing gender division of labour. His models of social dynamics are strictly gender-free. In his theorising about the state and sovereignty, power is always seen as capitalist and never as masculine. The working class and the multitude notionally include women, but do not seem to include children. Negri invokes biopolitical production, but I do not recall him ever concretely discussing education, growth and development, child care, school systems, or literacy. Until, right at the end of *Commonwealth*, education appears from nowhere as part of the "platform" of demands we are supposed to make on the world's governments.

There is something more about the gender issue than an absence. Negri's work has a positive gender content: it is patriarchal. It continues the heavy-masculine style of militancy and theory that orthodox marxism had embodied. His writing in both periods is declamatory, accusatory, and dogmatic in style. The tough male factory worker was the implicit hero of all the "workers's power" theorising and it is not surprising in gender terms that the movement produced violence. Similar figures of militancy, waving clenched fists, seem to stand atop all the thousand plateaus among the multitude. In a notable essay, Valentine Moghadam [2009] observes that both



US imperialism and Islamic militancy rely on heroic images of powerful masculinity. Negri's thought is contained in the same cultural framework.

Negri's 1981 monograph "The constitution of time" and the joint *Labor of Dionysus* mount intemperate attacks on the idea of peace and the practices of nonviolence [Negri 2003, 122-4; Hardt and Negri 1994, 290-5]. In *Crisi dello Stato-piano* there is an amazing attack on the idea that radicals can have fun while they subvert the system. Grim struggle and hatred of the class enemy are the order of the day. It seems that Negri did not like hippies. *Commonwealth*, again, seems to shift; it ends with a little essay on "instituting happiness," and encourages everyone to laugh. This is still laughter through clenched teeth: "the laugh of armed angels which accompanies the combat against evil" [Hardt and Negri 2009, 383]. Clearly, one is not supposed to inhale.

The masculine hardness of Negri's stances sometimes gives his writing great rhetorical power. I am haunted by his evocation of the trajectories of capitalist power and proletarian resistance/constituent power under the shadow of nuclear catastrophe: "These two lines move on the horizon of the world as an ungraspable alterity" [Hardt and Negri 1994, 312].

But this quality also undermines his political judgments. An important example is his stance of hostility towards "reformism." Undoubtedly the PCI betrayed the Italian revolution in 1945 and was less than enthusiastic about the new radicalism in the 1960s and 1970s. But when Negri theorized international social democracy as the agent of the terroristic strategy of the multinational corporations – in the year Allende was overthrown! – he passed the limits of credibility ["Theses on the Crisis," 1973, in *Red Notes* 1979, 47]. This attitude carried forward into *Empire* and *Multitude*. Negri can see no virtue in working within institutions such as the United Nations. He can see little value in NGOs, which "cannot change the system that produces and reproduces poverty" [Hardt and Negri 2004, 279]. The only virtue seems to be in separation and biopolitical resistance.

A second deeply problematic feature of Negri's thought, for a theorist of global society, is its Eurocentrism. Negri's intellectual sources are almost all European, and the few exceptions are North Americans. Here for instance is the list of thinkers about how the possible becomes real: "This problematic has been posed by authors from Lukács to Benjamin, from Adorno to the later Wittgenstein, from Foucault to Deleuze" [Hardt and Negri 2000, 368].

A large part of Negri's argument is developed as commentary on such canonical authors: Marx most of all, then Spinoza, then an array including those just listed, plus Lenin, Kant, and so on. Men, white, mostly dead, and emphatically Northern.

This Eurocentrism goes un-noticed in almost all the English-language debate about Negri's work. It is noticed in the global South [Grosfoguel 2008].

Negri shows little familiarity with, and no curiosity about, non-western intellectuals, concepts and debates. There are two pages on Toussaint, seen through the eyes of Césaire; a page on Césaire and “négritude,” seen through the eyes of Sartre; a few references to Mao as successor to Lenin; and in *Commonwealth* a passage about decolonial thought citing Mignolo; but none of these becomes part of the theoretical analysis. I have not found a single reference to Muslim intellectual debates in *Empire*, *Multitude* or *Commonwealth* – and Islam has a 150-year tradition of debate about capitalist global power and resistance to it [see Vahdat 2002; Kassab 2010].

The trilogy gestures towards other parts of the world, for instance citing the Zapatistas and the ANC as agents of struggle, and the social struggles in Bolivia as models. But Negri never discusses *substantively* social structures or social processes in the majority world. *Empire* does have one chapter on “colonial sovereignty” – but this provides a striking proof of the point. It focusses on *European* debates about colonialism, and ends up by trashing the strategy of actual national liberation movements – incidentally, completely misrepresenting Gandhi [Hardt and Negri 2000, 114-134].

In this respect, Negri is following the conventional path of social theory in the global North: constructing analyses out of the social experience of the global metropole and assuming that they apply universally [Connell 2006]. This stance is now subject to considerable critique, by authors who emphasise the colonial character of European knowledge formation [Gutiérrez, Boatcă and Costa 2010]. Negri cannot even begin on this issue because his conception of Empire dissolves the relationship of metropole to periphery. He openly rejects frameworks that emphasize this relationship, such as underdevelopment theory and the world-systems approach.

A third problem in his theorizing provides a partial explanation of this. In his recent work, Negri offers a social theory without a sociology. That is to say, he offers no account of actual social groups, actual institutions, actual dynamics of change and processes of struggle. This was already an issue in his earlier writing, which was strong on abstracted “tendencies” but weak on descriptive detail. Negri's important claim of the death of civil society, for instance, remained at the level of general assertion.

I do not doubt that most of the “tendencies” Negri identified, and the mechanisms of control and resistance he diagnosed in texts like *Crisi dello Stato-piano*, were really present. He was a very sharp analyst. But he did not seem to ask *how widely* they were present, *how much* self-valorization was happening, and what *other* social processes were also happening on the same terrain. And without hard information on these questions, Negri's belief that capitalism had entered a time of revolutionary

crisis – an assumption underpinning all his work in the 1970s – remained a hopeful guess.

At least his theorising of this period *was* based on years of personal involvement in actual industrial struggles. Negri then had a substantial body of practical knowledge to work from, which shows up in the sharpness of his diagnoses. This is not the case with the trilogy. Negri seems to have had no interest, after his exile from Italy, in finding other empirical knowledge bases – ethnographic, macro-sociological, biographical, whatever – to fill the gap. For concrete knowledge, Negri substitutes panoramic gestures that tend to wipe out differences and specificities:

It is no longer possible to demarcate large geographical zones as center and periphery, North and South. In geographical regions such as the Southern Cone of Latin America or Southeast Asia, all levels of production can exist simultaneously and side by side [...] In the metropolises, too, labor spans the continuum from the heights to the depths of capitalist production: the sweatshops of New York and Paris can rival those of Hong Kong and Manila [Hardt and Negri 2000, 335].

This claim is partly, but only partly, taken back in *Multitude* [Hardt and Negri 2004, 164-5, 278]. *Commonwealth* proceeds on the same basis – mentioning regional difference and the dynamics of place (even citing Sassen’s work), and then sweeping on and effectively ignoring them.

The lack of concrete knowledge is strikingly revealed in the account of power. *Empire* presents a theory of global capitalism in crisis but never discusses actual multinational corporations, their strategies or problems. *Commonwealth* talks about a global aristocracy but has nothing to say about the specifics of their power. Negri discusses theories of sovereignty at great length but never analyzes particular regimes and their techniques of rule, nor how the rulers handle their problems. “Power,” in short, remains an abstract postulate not a sociological reality.

The “multitude” is even vaguer as a social entity. Negri has been strongly criticized on this point [Sprague 2011]. Callinicos [2002, 320] aptly remarks that the idea of the multitude “is less a tool of class analysis than an expression of good intentions.” After following the concept through four books, I too would find it difficult to say exactly who is part of the multitude and who is not, and just how its composition is changing and why. Again, questions of scope and scale – how *widely* the diagnosed processes are happening – are neither asked nor answered. Negri, perhaps as a result of collaborating with a literary theorist, increasingly talks about a “figure” of resistance rather than a *group* engaged in historically located practices [cf. Hardt and Negri 2000, 407ff.]

In defence, Negri might argue that his theorising is meant as a tendential analysis, a discussion of trends that arise from the basic logic of the system. That is cer-

tainly what he argued methodologically in the 1970s [e.g. *Crisi dello Stato-piano*, chs 1 and 6]. And from some standpoints, the inclusiveness of the “multitude” concept is a virtue. Theorists in the critical disability movement, for instance, value Negri’s analysis because it offers a way to include disabled bodies and families in the mainstream critique, rather than always treating them as outside the margins of the capitalist economy [Mitchell and Snyder 2010; Goodley and Lawthom 2011].

But the lack of substantive social science is hard to overcome. In a brief and devastating contribution to the debate about *Empire*, Giovanni Arrighi [2002, 6-7] noted the book’s “heavy reliance on metaphors and theories and systematic avoidance of empirical evidence.” As a result, Arrighi observed, some of the book’s key claims about globalization are simply false.

Without the sociology, it is clear that the drama of self-valorization and the principle of dynamic separation – the basic ideas carried forward from the days of *Potere operaio* and *Autonomia* that underpin the concept of the Multitude and predict the overthrow of Empire – cannot become a credible model of change. The theorising of 1998, like the theorising of 1978, has an apocalyptic edge, but the apocalypse is not happening at any particular address.

### **A Partial Conclusion**

Though Negri’s theorising does not provide a credible picture of world society or the dynamics of change, I still value his work and think that both analysts and activists can learn from it. Even his flawed account of Empire has valuable insights for an understanding of globalization. Negri emphasises that global capitalism is an unstable and dynamic improvisation, not a well-entrenched, automatically-functioning system. Global capitalism is the child of crisis tendencies and it contains ongoing contradictions. Well, other people have said that. What Negri uniquely emphasises is that the global system has been improvised in response to pressure *from below*, the de-structuring pressure of the exploited, and that it continues to evolve in response to challenge and resistance from below. The capitalist economic system needs a heavy-handed state because it can never escape the resistance of its own workers and consumers.

Across his career Negri has given us notable insights into the dynamics of the modern state. In the 1970s, his work was far ahead of the dreary instrumentalist-vs-structuralist debate on the capitalist state, in understanding the changing form of the state, the twists and turns of economic policy and party strategy, and the potential for violence in advanced capitalism. His 1990s model of Empire is much too abstract, but

there is value in his argument about network power, and about the limited capacities of particular power centres, even the government of the sole superpower.

In his earlier work Negri made an astonishing prediction of neo-liberalism, the dominant political framework of the world we live in now. In this, and in his later account of what neo-liberalism has become, he shows its roots not in economic truth but in the failure of previous capitalist strategies. He recognizes its search for totality and its capacity for violence. He diagnoses the purposelessness and sterility of the neo-liberal order, the fundamental arbitrariness of its techniques of rule, and the pervasive corruption that comes with it.

In the later work, especially *Time for Revolution*, Negri gives a central place in social dynamics to *labour* – a concept that contemporary social theory and philosophy have practically forgotten. Here he is being true to his roots in the Italian worker’s movement, and this background gives a certain realism to his most abstract flights. In his early work Negri gave a highly suggestive account of labour and its social embodiment, including the changing composition of the working class. This is carried forward, with different terminology, in the late discussions of “immaterial labour” and “biopolitical production.”

Most suggestive of all, I think, is Negri’s continuing emphasis on the creativity of labour, its unique capacity to make worlds. If there is a poetry of social analysis, this is surely a fine piece. The concept of self-valorization ties this emphasis on creativity to a kind of eschatology in Negri’s social thought. But even without the expectation that a communist utopia may arrive next Tuesday, the idea of self-valorization raises very interesting questions about labour processes, the limits of control in advanced capitalism, and – I have to say it – working-class autonomy.

At odd intervals Negri’s writings spin off stimulating reflections on the method of social analysis. His certainty that we can understand the modern world if we only reflect deeply enough on the *Grundrisse* can be set aside. But it is interesting that a militant Marxist is quite prepared to ditch the categories of *Capital*, and to ditch even such an icon of Marxist method as the dialectic. Negri’s insistence on the *non-dialectical* character of the relationship between classes in advanced capitalism is very thought-provoking. This methodological idea underpins the theme of separation, the politics of autonomy, and the concept of self-valorization. Negri’s treatment of disjunction in social processes may be relevant to a range of other problems too, even to understanding colonialism.

Finally, for all readers interested in the relationship of intellectual work to politics, Negri gives us one of the most striking examples in the last generation of the engaged intellectual, notable for his concern to develop new ideas without compromising a commitment to radical change. Under conditions of extraordinary stress Negri

has produced a life-long stream of original ideas and writing, and has kept a deep optimism about the possibilities of social change and grassroots activism. Whether we agree with his arguments or not, we can honour an intellectual who has never given up on the cause that the New Left used to call participatory democracy.

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## The Poet of Autonomy: Antonio Negri As a Social Theorist

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**Abstract:** This paper examines Antonio Negri's accounts of empire and multitude as an impressive, though flawed, theory of globalization emphasising new forms of class struggle on a world scale. It then examines the sources of Negri's thinking in his intellectual and political experience in the Italian new left of the 1960s and 1970s, especially his emphasis on the way transformations of capitalist power are centrally reactions to changing forms of working-class challenge and the emergence of working-class autonomy. The originality of Negri's thinking in this period is emphasised, including his remarkable early theorization of neoliberalism. His thought in both periods, however, is limited in key ways: by its masculinism, by its Eurocentrism, and by the lack of a concrete sociology of capitalist society. For all these limitations, Negri's work remains an impressive contribution to progressive thought.

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*Keywords:* capitalism, empire, class struggle, globalisation, autonomy.

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