

EMPIRE, GLOBAL CAPITALISM, AND THEORY: RECONSIDERING HARDT AND NEGRI

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ABSTRACT

It has been over a decade since the publication of Michael Hardt and Antoni Negri's widely read Empire, a book that claimed humanity had entered a qualitatively new era in the organization of power. How do critical sociological studies that also theorize global capitalism depart from or share affinities with Hardt and Negri's Foucauldian-inspired notion of empire? The two most important shared insights is the notion of a new epoch in the history of world capitalism and the conceptualization of a global system that moves beyond the idea of U.S. imperialism solely as behind its fundamental structure. However, overpowering Hardt and Negri's framework are some fundamental problems: the vague and nondialectical idea of multitude, the lack of the role of the state, their confusing and contradictory idea of constitutionalism, and a misapprehension of immaterial labor.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union and just prior to the events of September 11, 2001, globalization was omnipresent, a seemingly uncontested reality. At this time, philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri suggested that we

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were in the midst of a qualitatively new era in the organization of power, as the very nature of the economic, political, and social structures of our world had transformed. All of humanity, swirling in self-subordination and resistance, was swept up in the “constitutionalization of a supranational world power” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 6) that “envelops the entire space of what it considers civilization, a boundless universal space,” presenting itself as “permanent, eternal, and necessary” (p. 11). A synoptic and unorthodox notion for understanding our world, *Empire* remains as hotly contested as when first published.¹

Following up with two more volumes, *Multitude* (2004) and *Commonwealth* (2009), the authors have further developed their argument, though the core ideas remain. *Empire* is a novel system “configured *ab initio* as a dynamic and flexible systemic structure” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 13). This chapter seeks to examine insights and weaknesses at the core of Hardt and Negri’s notion of empire, and consider these alongside sociological notions that likewise describe globalization as a novel era in the history of capitalism.

Empire is full of brilliant insights into the way capitalism has changed. It suggests the rise of a new era in social relations, developed through huge leaps in industrial and managerial technology and through a world economy dominated by transnational corporations (TNCs). Nation-state imperialism no longer lies behind the fundamental structure of the capitalist system. They describe a new *global* hegemony, “a systemic totality” that takes on the “dominant position in the global order” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 14). Hardt and Negri’s notion of empire has been juxtaposed with other Marxian-inspired works. As sociologist of globalization, William I. Robinson explains his own work, as that of Philip McMichael (1996), Leslie Sklair (1999, 2002), and others, shares with Hardt and Negri the view that “globalization represents a new stage in the evolving world capitalist system that came into being some five centuries ago,” thus advancing a “*global capitalism* thesis or school” (Robinson, 2004, p. 2). Although there are many differences between these various theoretical approaches, all of them suggest that global capitalism represents a qualitatively new epoch in the history of capitalism. Thus, together these approaches are described well as the “global capitalism school.”

Whereas the sociological- and neo-Marxian-influenced theories of most of these authors locate global capitalism as a new epoch that began during the last *quarter* of the twentieth century with the rise of new socioeconomic relations brought on by global capitalist expansion, Hardt and Negri in their philosophical manifesto argue that the shift occurred during the last *half* of the twentieth century starting in the post-World War II boom. The “U.S.

entry into World War II tied the New Deal indissolubly to the crisis of European imperialisms and projected the New Deal on the scene of world government as an alternative, successor model. From that point on, the effects of the New Deal reforms would be felt over the entire global terrain” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, pp. 243–244). The two authors write of a shift in power, where the center of power has shifted from the nation-state to a new relationship of power that engulfs the entire world and all aspects of humanity. Hardt and Negri are not focused on political economy then, but rather, on power in general. They seek to describe the formation and structure of a global power relation that has arisen during the second half of the twentieth century.

Hardt and Negri take their inspiration from Marxian theory (Bowring, 2004), but the driving force behind their notion of empire is Foucauldian – which recognizes power relations (not material relations) at the core of historical processes. This chapter seeks to show how Hardt and Negri’s notion of empire, which claims a new era in power relations has come to exist within the age of capitalism, compares in some ways but for the most part strongly contrasts with the other sociological notions of *global capitalism*.

In examining the huge changes taking place through globalization, this chapter argues that it is vital that we recognize the role of social forces (such as class fractions and strata) *and* the institutions through which they operate. Rather than plunge into the abyss of Foucauldian theory where power is “no place,” the main thrust of this chapter argues that Hardt and Negri’s Foucauldian-influenced approach in many ways blurs a critical understanding of our world. It lays out a theoretical and analytical framework that at its core is detached from material and social processes.

The first section of this chapter lays out apparent affinities between these different approaches. It will highlight some specific insights that Hardt and Negri provide for conceptualizing global capitalism. The next section problematizes some of the core theoretical concepts of Hardt and Negri’s notion of empire, discussing how these obfuscate material and social relations. Finally, the third section discusses some sociological notions of global capitalism as a new epoch in the capitalist system, arguing that these approaches provide more nuanced and useful social analyses.

APPARENT AFFINITIES

Three key claims of *Empire* are as following: first, a new epoch in the history of capitalism has arisen; second, the fundamental structure of our global

system is not just driven by U.S. imperialism but rather is propelled by a much wider array of interconnected power relations; and third, utilizing Foucauldian ideas such as “normalization” they suggest that new ideological, technological, and other processes have developed that are bringing all of humanity into adherence with a common system. The first and second points appear to share the clearest affinity with some of the other global capitalism school writings; however, the third point may also be useful to such approaches. Next, each of these claims will be discussed in more depth and it will be considered how other studies relate with these general premises.

(A) Hardt and Negri suggest that a qualitatively new era has occurred in the development of capitalism. “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” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. xi). They add, “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” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. xi). Pointing out what they see as fundamental changes that our contemporary world has undergone, Hardt and Negri present a speculative manifesto on how this is constitutive of a new epoch.

The novelty of global capitalism has been shown in a number of important works (Dicken, 2007; Harris, 2006; Robinson, 2004; Sklair, 2002a). Sociologist Leslie Sklair observes how in recent decades transnational practices have emerged, operating across the global system interconnected with the regional, the national, and the local in economic, political, and culture-ideological ways. Operating outside of the global system, Sklair explains, “is becoming increasingly more difficult as capitalist globalization penetrates ever more widely and deeply” (Sklair, 2009, p. 528).

Hardt and Negri suggest that transformative processes are widespread, touching even the functions of the national state as a “crisis of political relations in the national context” occurs (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 307). Instead of one superpower (the United States) dominating the world, in empire a new transnational combination will be required for global order, even if the United States remains the military powerhouse. In supporting this point, Hardt and Negri quote Robinson, “‘The hegemonic baton will likely be passed,’ maintains William Robinson, with an eye to this novelty, ‘from the United States, not to a new hegemonic nation-state or even to a regional bloc, but to a transnational configuration’” (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 232). Hardt and Negri add, in their own words, “Once we focus on the

assemblages and authorities being formed in the context of global governance, we can see that a new imperial formation is emerging that can function only through the collaboration of a variety of national, supranational, and nonnational powers. Our future politics will have to be cast in relation to this Empire” (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 232).

(B) Many have found persuasive the idea in Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* of moving beyond nation-state centrism and beyond the focus on U.S. imperialism as driving the fundamental structure of our global system, which will now be examined in more detail. Hardt and Negri suggest that dominant political relations are transnationalizing and becoming more diffuse, where the “unity of single governments has been disarticulated and invested in a series of separate bodies (banks, international organisms of planning, and so forth, in addition to the traditional separate bodies), which all increasingly refer for legitimacy to the transnational level of power” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 308), a process that “appears as disorderly and even [a] chaotic set of controls and representative organizations” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 309). They make here an interesting observation that national states are becoming tied to an institutionalism beyond traditional avenues of national power. For example, they explain that institutional and state “functions and constitutional elements have effectively been displaced to other levels and domains” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 307).

As Hardt and Negri describe, the underlying essence of phenomena manifests itself in many ways. In this manner, they argue, we can understand many political, social, and economic phenomenon, in the era of empire, as conflictive and contradictory in different ways, while at the same time occurring as part of a fundamental global structure that has come into existence. This is an important point, but such an idea can also be understood more thoroughly through other studies of the “global capitalism school.”

The unilateral invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan by the United States, for example, can be viewed as a conflict through the scope of global capitalism (Baker, 2009). Fractions of transnational capitalists aligned with the U.S. national state benefit from the opening of these countries to global capitalist penetration, but many other fractions do as well as time has passed. As the *Financial Times* reports while “the US has laid down more lives here since 2001 than any other power,” the most likely bidders to exploit a new host of resource deposits in Afghanistan “are Chinese or Indian companies seeking resources to fuel burgeoning economies” and that the Afghan government “is also seeking investors for oil and gas blocks that have drawn interest from France’s *Total* and Swiss-based *Addax Petroleum*” (Green, 2010).²

Even as the United States remains the major military powerhouse and holds significant influence in many other ways, transnational elites around the world operating through various national and supranational institutions are able to pursue different strategies in connection to the accumulation of global capital, yet they must juggle these with policies that are often contradictory but are required to maintain their own legitimacy (in the eyes of local or national constituents for example).

What is required is a recognition that conflict between states and various groups can still occur within larger systems of multi- and reciprocal-causality, meaning that within such a system, a global system, conflictive and contradictory processes can occur between groups and institutions while these same groups and institutions remain mutually developed and linked to multiple causes. For example, elites operating the U.S. national state can do something in the interest of transnational capital but also deploy tactical and strategic differences in carrying such activities out, and also maintain policies that are required to ensure their local and/or national legitimacy. While many scholars view these state activities as evidence of the influence of a U.S. *national* capitalist class, notions proposed by scholars of the global capitalism school force us to consider how transnational relations are at the heart of today's political economy.

The view that such processes most benefit a *national* capitalist class is the approach of more traditional Marxists, like Ellen Meiksins Wood, for example. In her critique of Hardt and Negri, she writes, "Capitalism's purely 'economic' mode of exploitation, the growing commodification of life, the regulation of social relations by the impersonal 'laws' of the market, have meant the emergence of a distinct 'economic' sphere, formally separate from the 'political'" (Wood, 2003a, p. 66). However, her approach, as with the approaches of some others, that "the national organization of capitalist economies has remained stubbornly persistent" (Wood, 2003b, p. 23) fails to take into consideration the empirical reality of global capitalism: that nearly all countries in the world have been brought into the global capitalist system where TNCs operate across national frontiers and investors hold and trade in trillions of dollars everyday. Capitalist state institutions, such as the national state, have a material role to play, for example, to coerce workers through laws or with armed force, to keep infrastructure purring, or to promote processes of normalization.³ But we need to understand how many state institutions and the elites who operate through them have come to become dependent on circuits of global capital accumulation, and how their activities are essential for transnational capitalists who do not have the same kind of networks or coercive power. Taking these processes under

consideration, scholars of the “global capitalism school” have presented new theories.

Hardt and Negri move us toward considering the constitution of power *transnationally* (or how power can become functionally integrated in different ways across borders so as it cannot be reduced to processes bound to the nation-state). They move us away from reifying, what for many is a chief axiom that the deep structure of capitalism is made up of a union of realism and classical imperialism – an approach that never gets at the underlying essence of global capitalism.

(C) The Foucauldian tradition, utilized by Hardt and Negri, is interesting in that it opens us to thinking about how power saturates the most secluded recesses of our cultural and social existence. For example, the idea of “normalization,” or how to bring people into adherence with a system, is a very useful idea that Hardt and Negri borrow from Foucault. Such a notion is useful for considering how intimate dimensions of human existence (culture, the body, and so on) are invaded by ideologies and practices associated with a larger system. This idea is useful in thinking about capitalist expansion, and more specifically those intimate processes of corporeal domination; a profound idea explored by Jürgen Habermas (1991) and others. As Hardt and Negri explain, “The society of control might thus be characterized by an *intensification and generalization of the normalizing apparatuses of disciplinarity* that internally animate our common and daily practices, but in contrast to discipline, this control extends well outside the structured sites of social institutions through flexible and fluctuating networks” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 41, emphasis added). The point here is that power can widen and manifest itself in obscured ways, for example, where the “Normal is established as a principle of coercion” through a whole range of professions such as teaching, medicine, and industrial production (Foucault, 1977, p. 184). Even in capitalist society, where individual expression has reached new heights, huge systemic barriers of inequality exist promoting certain dominant visions. While some of these barriers are easy to spot (such as the domination of public debate by unelected elites through media monopolies), more difficult to understand is how we ourselves internalize (and, can promote) in an individualized way what is “normal.” “In a sense, the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialties and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another” (1977, p. 184).

In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault writes that there is a “whole series of ‘carceral mechanisms which seem distinct enough – since they are

intended to alleviate pain, to cure, to comfort – but which all tend, like the prison, to exercise a power of *normalization*” (1977, p. 308). Insights such as these have been critically appropriated into a renewed historical materialism, for example, considering how essential parts of human existence are integrated into systems of power. Decades before Foucault, Gramsci (2010) pointed out the role of consent in hegemonic power relations, as has Harvey (1991) more recently. Nicos Poulantzas in his engagement with Foucault recognized the value of such ideas. In a similar manner, this chapter suggests that there are some valuable ideas in Hardt and Negri’s notion of empire, for example the Foucauldian idea of “normalization” can be reconsidered in relation to global capitalism. Clyde Barrow makes the point that many institutions, practices, and ideologies shift in relation to capitalist development, as when he explains how some Marxian schools of thought “have called attention to the fact that the historical process of capital accumulation can be sustained only to the extent that cultural values, forms of business organization, government policy, law, and educational curricula are compatible with the requirements of each phase in the accumulation process” (Barrow, 1993, p. 65). What is clear is that many social phenomena can be understood as developing in relation to the fundamental structure of the system in which we live.

Whereas Foucault as well as Hardt and Negri inflate an unspecific and abstract nature of power as *causal priori* of historic processes, describing this phenomenon as biopower, it is a few ideas *within* this notion of biopower, such as normalization, that can be considered useful on their own. Taken as a whole, the notion of biopower is too abstract, as it describes the resistance by all (especially in Hardt and Negri’s conception of it, although, not as much as in Foucault’s) as well as the absorption of all, where all participate in their own subordination. This leads to Hardt and Negri’s idea of the multitude, an idea discussed in the second section. Having pointed out some of the most useful ideas in Hardt and Negri’s notion of empire, we can now turn to analyzing its problems.

WEAKNESSES OF EMPIRE

Next, this chapter looks at what are fundamental problems in Hardt and Negri’s notion of empire: first, the vague and nondialectical idea of multitude, second, the lack of the role of the state, third, their confusing and contradictory idea of constitutionalism, and, fourth, the role they assign to

immaterial labor that ignores fundamental structures of material labor processes.

(A) The problem with the idea of a multitude, or the multiplicity of all that is subjective, is that it misses the complexities of class structure and composition. The multitude includes everyone, all of humanity, from the Silicon Valley venture capitalist to the unemployed piquetero in Argentina. This moves us away from looking at distinct forms of production and exploitation as informing social relations and class formation, and instead places our focus on power in general (Callinicos, 2009). “The multitude is composed of innumerable internal differences that can never be reduced to a unity or a single identity,” in this way “the multitude is a multiplicity of all these singular differences” (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. xiv). This vagueness leaves no place for class conflict, as all of humanity is lumped into multitude. Yet, for Hardt and Negri, resistance occurs everywhere; a new type of resistance, as the structures of the world are enveloped in empire and the groupings of humanity are enveloped in multitude, an unspecific speculation on the reorganization of spatiality and subjectivity. Not to be pinned down though, they stress that as resistance occurs everywhere, such struggles are disconnected (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 54).

The multitude is an amorphous idea, as the authors are not crystal clear in identifying any social groups or class who wield hegemonic relations. Power occurs for power’s sake. This is the “non-place of power.” For example, the three-tiered pyramid power structure is a framework with which Hardt and Negri lay out what they see as the structure of global order. No one falls outside of this structure, as the bottom tier includes all of civil society and the entire social plexus. Where do popular movements and forces of resistance fit? Where is the dialectical opposition? My critique here of Hardt and Negri’s theory is similar to the critique of Foucault’s work posited by Poulantzas that it lacks an analysis of social contradictions and of a relational system. Poulantzas argued that power always attaches to certain social groups and structures; this was very different than Foucault’s understanding of a diffuse, radiating, faceless power. Poulantzas observed, for example, that for Foucault, “Power is not then a quality attached to a class ‘in-itself,’ understood as a collection of agents, but depends on, and springs from, a relational system of material places occupied by particular agents” (Poulantzas, 1978, p. 147). Such approaches provide a “vision which dilutes and scatters power among innumerable microsituations; they thereby seriously underestimate the importance of classes and the class struggle and ignore the central role of the State” (Poulantzas, 1978, p. 44). But to consider power and resistance, we need to

accurately identify broader class and social relations. In the case of Hardt and Negri, not only is this left out, but the authors also never clearly articulate the material necessity of capitalist state institutions for the transnational reproduction of capital.

(B) Another problem in *Empire* is that the state is poorly explained or understood. By not clarifying how power plays out institutionally, the role of the state is taken for granted and minimized in a problematic manner. For Hardt and Negri, the struggle for appropriating state power is over as the multitude seeks sudden and total emancipation. There is little need then to properly understand the vicissitudes of the state.

Hardt and Negri attempting to position their understanding of the state in the historical context of capitalism hold that the development of capitalism, since its inception, has required an “imperial administration” of bourgeois and elites to mediate the operation of power. Citing the classical Marxian theorists Karl Kautsky, Rudolf Hilferding, and Vladimir Lenin, the authors explain that as capitalism has developed and monopolized through nation-state imperialism, boundaries have solidified, obstructing the full realization of a capitalist world market. The breaking of these obstructive barriers is brought about only through a total subsumption by power, or by what they describe as biopower. Foucault created the term biopower, as he explained, to describe “a number of phenomena that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the 18th century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species” (Foucault, 2007, p. 1). Hardt and Negri suggest that in the second half of the twentieth century, we have witnessed the ascendancy of a new biopower monolith: “Empire is the political subject that effectively regulates these global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. xi). Hardt and Negri use here Foucault’s term “biopolitical” to describe the style of government that regulates populations through biopower.

They attempt to lay out a formal schema for the structure of a global biopolitical order, what they see as a polybius pyramid. At the top of this pyramid is a command structure of powerful states and institutions, with the goals of: (a) “political mediation with respect to the global hegemonic powers,” (b) “bargaining with respect to the transnational corporations,” and (c) “redistribution of income according to biopolitical needs within their own limited territories.” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 310). In the middle tier are less powerful states and institutions, and at the bottom of this pyramid is the

entirety of civil society, which through their activities *within* the system take part in their own subordination.

Empire is more a philosophical manifesto than a sociological treatise, making wide claim, for example that “government and politics come to be *completely integrated* into the system of transnational command” as “controls are articulated through a series of international bodies and function” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 307, emphasis added). They speculate that “politics does not disappear; what disappears is any notion of the autonomy of the political” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 307). These are interesting ideas as they suggest that new kinds of interconnections, practices, and ideologies are involved in the reproduction of global capitalism. But in emphasizing such transformative processes, without the nuanced empirically based analysis to back it up, the authors tend to speculate. They describe a *completely* formed new system, an amorphous “smooth space defined by uncoded flows, flexibility, continual modulation, and tendential equalization” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 31). The problem with this approach is that it creates a vision of power that is abstract, unlocatable, and unscientific. It moves us away from understanding how the social basis of material processes needs to be integral to any critical understanding of economic and state structures and the changes they undergo through globalization. For example, how and why are the practices and ideologies constituted that carry the spread of transnational power relations? Instead, Hardt and Negri place the reader’s focus on power detached from material reality and dispersed to tiny repositories strung out ad infinitum.

(C) In their idea of constitutionalism, Hardt and Negri describe the U.S. constitution as ushering in a nominal juridical system around the planet, conflating the U.S. constitution with something that regulates global capitalism. Here they inflate a superficial U.S. juridical structure as representative of new and emerging legal frameworks encompassing the world.

Hardt and Negri argue that the herald of today’s “mixed constitution” appeared with the Jeffersonian U.S. Constitution and the manifest destiny of U.S. imperialism, where “across the great open spaces the constituent tendency wins out over the constitutional decree, the tendency of the immanence of the principle over regulative reflection, and the initiative of the multitude over the centralization of power” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 169). It serves as a juridical legitimization of the conquest of “open space” for “all.” This is “how the constitution of empire begins to form” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 309). Hardt and Negri describe U.S. imperialism with its

notion of open markets and indirect rule as the central historical piece leading to today's new phase in world history: *empire*.

Following the Wilsonian era, during the mid- to late-twentieth century, a hybridized version of this constitution spread promoted by U.S. policy makers and corporations. A countervailing force, "mixed constitution" provided a juridical doctrinaire against uprisings and popular movements. Worldwide governments developed amalgamating themselves with such ideas. This guaranteed a "circulation of goods, technologies, and labor power ... the collective dimension of the market" (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 317). Integrated today in empire, national states across the world have adopted this "mixed constitution," as an absorption of political repositories across the planet into the biopolitical system. Is it helpful to lend a philosophical notion of transcendence to U.S. expansiveness as a unique global form of empire or is this an ahistorical concept? Can the emergence of new regulatory and legal frameworks through globalization be condensed to springing from the historical blue print of Pax Americana? Another question arises: does this notion of "mixed constitution" serve as a back door through which empire becomes an implicitly nation-state-driven concept?

(D) The idea of immaterial labor cannot be assigned the role that Hardt and Negri assign it. Hardt and Negri's conception of immaterial labor is linked most to the changes to the mode of capitalist production during the post-Fordist era. The Italian intellectual tradition of operaismo links the notion of immaterial labor to transformative processes in contemporary capitalism, where, for example, the transformation is made from Fordist to computerized hi-tech lean production. In this type of production process, sometimes described as "Toyotism," the product may already have been sold prior to its production. Down this path, Hardt and Negri describe (1) industrial production as immaterial labor, (2) analytical and symbolic tasks as immaterial labor, and (3) immaterial labor as involving the production and manipulation of affects (such as emotional labor, friendship networks, and mothership) yet still requiring management by a human agent. These are useful ideas, but Hardt and Negri place immaterial labor at the center of the multitude, the center of the empire, and the center of transformative forces. From this approach, the formal subsumption of labor under capital, where managers dominate laborers, is replaced-in-full by the real subsumption of labor, where machines and abstract processes dominate labor.⁴ Labor becomes simultaneously *more* resistant and *more* repressed.

In this way, the nuts and bolts of the material relations are displaced by an overly deterministic view of hi-tech immaterial processes, underscoring

the continual material needs and linkages that immaterial processes require. On this point Timothy Brennan's critique of *Empire* is relevant: "Since the 'system' for Hardt and Negri 'constructs social fabrics that evacuate or render ineffective any contradiction ... in an insignificant play of self-generating and self-regulating equilibria', it is logical for them to conclude that the only true agency must occur within subjectivity, which is located in social fabrics but not of them" (Brennan, 2003, p. 110 in Balakrishnan, 2003). He adds, "The end of labor can then be announced as though it were a vast expansion of types of labour" (Brennan, 2003, p. 110). The idea of biopower leads to the overdetermination of immateriality as it loses focus on the tangible material relations that constitute social reproduction. Economist Georges Liidakis makes the point that as the authors overstress the impact of information technology, this leads to what they see as evidence that immaterial labor is the now-dominant trend in value production, so that "the material conditions of production are largely dismissed, and with them capitalism-specific property relations and production relation" (Liidakis, 2005, pp. 358–359). The human being lives and remains in a material world. How can one argue that the informality of power or immateriality of labor has so completely eclipsed material relations?

Whereas Foucault would ontologize defeat (except in some rare cases) and would reject totalizing struggles, Hardt and Negri would ontologize "of being communist," which for them is success. As resistance is everywhere, and power is nowhere, simply "being" is a success. In this way, whereas Foucault would see the defeat of the totalizing struggle as inevitable, Hardt and Negri would see in the epoch of empire success as inevitable.⁵ Hardt and Negri envision totalizing struggles as moribund, as something of the past and doomed to failure. Instead, they see a global explosion of diffuse incommensurate struggles. Only this can overpower the system at large. However, this conflation of politics with dissensus leads to a politics of glorified rebellion, indicative of a wider and problematic theme within some currents of the anticorporate globalization movement. This is the theme taken up by two other germinal works of the anticorporate globalization movement: Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (1999) and John Holloway's *Change the World Without Taking Power* (2002). Unwilling to deal with the larger political system and the state following the fall of much of the statist-vanguardist left, autonomist currents, as on display in *Empire*, have promoted an inflexible horizontalism that ultimately is unable to challenge capitalist states or the expansion of global capitalism.⁶ The key issue here is the weakness of formalistic antistatism. While horizontalism is crucial for any emancipatory project, leftists must be prepared to use different

strategies including some vertical by nature. Otherwise, we vacate social struggle over the locations where power congeals.

THEORIZING GLOBAL CAPITALISM

Scholars have theorized and shown empirically many of the novel social arrangements that have come about in the era of global capitalism (Harris, 2006; McMichael, 1996; Robinson, 2004; Rodriguez, 2010; Sassen, 2001; Sklair, 2001, 2002; Van der Pijl, 1998). As global networks of production and finance pushed through TNCs and other institutions redefine the scale of the world economy (Dicken, 2007; Porter, 2005; Schiffrin & Bisat, 2004), transnational relations form within and between different class fractions and strata, even creating distinct new social groups. One of these new social groups, the transnational capitalist class (TCC), is tied together as a conscious class, a class in and of itself whose material basis is in TNCs and the accumulation of global capital (Sklair, 2001; Robinson, 2001). However, such a class is not monolithic. Many fractions exist within this class, with different historic trajectories and tethered in different ways to one another and to various institutions, states, regions, companies, and industries. Some have begun to theorize how transnational class relations are also emerging among subaltern groups, from service sector workers and migrants to globalizing low wage labor forces (Struna, 2009). In addition, as some class fractions and strata are becoming transnationally oriented, others remain more nationally oriented; as the author has shown in another study, it is useful then to look at how such groups operate in relation to one another (Sprague, 2012b).

In addition to theorizing socioeconomic change through globalization, theorists of the global capitalism school have also considered the changing dynamics of politics, and in relation to the state and institutionality. Sociologist Leslie Sklair conceptualizes a global system in which transnational processes intersect with the national state and political struggles over it occur “between globalizers and localizers and/or economic and cultural nationalists” (Sklair as quoted in Sprague, 2009, p. 504; see also Sklair, 2002). Robinson has theorized the analytical abstraction of a transnational state (TNS) and TNS apparatuses, suggesting that these makeup a “loose network comprised of supranational political and economic institutions together with national state apparatuses” as state institutions around the world are being “penetrated and transformed by transnational forces” (Robinson, 2007, p. 131 in Ritzer, 2007; see also Robinson, 2001, 2004). Political economist Kanishka Jayasuriya likewise suggests an ongoing

transformation of the state linked to socioeconomic forces that are novel to the historical present, “via complex systems of multi-level regulation, meta-governance, and systems of soft law, all of which enable the transnationalization of the state apparatus” (Jayasuriya as quoted in Sprague, 2010, p. 128; see also Jayasuriya, 1999, 2001a, 2001b). Innovative ideas such as these help us to analyze and explain transnational relations of social reproduction and in relation to their condensation within state and institutional apparatuses.

Nuanced studies of ongoing alternatives in the epoch of global capitalism have moved the discussion on social conflicts far beyond Hardt and Negri’s abstract idea of multitude. Sociologist William K. Carroll, on the premise that the phenomena of global capitalism is dialectically related, argues that “from the nineteenth century onwards international labour organizations and left-party organizations” have entered the fray of global civil society, and that “since the 1990s, a wide range of subaltern groups opposed to neoliberal capitalism has begun to mount a concerted struggle for position, constituting a potentially counter-hegemonic bloc of aligned social forces” (2010, p. 205). He argues as well that gatherings such as the World Social Forum, first convened in January of 2001, are forming what he describes as a potential transnational springboard from below, “into an alternative discursive and organizational space” (Carroll, 2010, pp. 218–220). Harris points out what he describes as “alternative globalizations” by looking at ongoing radical alternatives, for example, from the antistatist approach (cooperatives in Argentina and the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico) to the Gramscian-inspired struggle from below to capture state and civil power (Bolivarian Venezuela and Bolivia) or the long-standing cooperatives in the Italian state of Emilia-Romagna where he suggests some may be able to develop a “democratic corporate model that is competitive on a global scale” (Harris, 2006, pp. 208–221). “Given the difficulties of autonomist, state and market strategies for social transformation we can see that no easy answers exist, no silver bullet, in the quest for a just society” (Harris, 2006, p. 221). We can also look at a host of other ongoing transformative processes, from the upsurge of popular movements in the Middle East to the rise of the counter hegemonic ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas) bloc in the Caribbean and Latin America. It is important as well to understand the contradictions and problems that these alternatives face, all the while recognizing that in capitalism, especially in global capitalism, almost everyone is – by necessity – compromised and complicit in someway. So too, democratic and emancipatory left struggles can involve some ugly compromises and contradictions in order to survive,

all the while risking defeat, co-optation, or marginalization through a number of ways. The point here though is that through studying the shifting activities and composition of social groups and the institutions and movements through which they act (including those alternatives that exist), we find a clearer picture of what is occurring in our world.

The two main affinities of the neo-Marxian or neo-Marxian-*influenced* approaches discussed in this chapter (such as those of Harris, Jayasuriya, Robinson, Sklair, and others), with the Foucauldian–Marxian inspired approach of Hardt and Negri are (1) the conceptualization of a new epoch in the capitalist system and (2) an analysis of the structure of global capitalism that goes beyond traditional Marxist understandings of nation-state imperialism. Differences between the global capitalism school approaches abound, but the differences are most distinct when comparing Hardt and Negri alongside the others. Jayasuriya highlights one such difference, this in regard to Hardt and Negri’s description of the contours of global order: “There is no single sovereign centre within the global order; neither can the global order be reducible to our usual ‘Westphalian’ order of multiple and pluralist sovereign units,” yet, still, “the almost mystical nature of what they assume to be a new decentralised sovereignty obscures the transformation that is occurring ...” (Jayasuriya, 2004, p. 3).

Another important distinction is that Hardt and Negri never provide a basis for their theory to align with a Marxian conception of social relations. They continue to use Marxian ideas such as the formal subsumption and real subsumption of labor which is the prevalent idea for their understanding of immaterial labor that in turn their entire notion of multitude rests upon (Bowring, 2004). But Hardt and Negri never outline a clear idea of class, as Robinson and Sklair suggest. Robinson writes for example that the “TCC [transnational capitalist class] is the key agent of capitalist globalization, for Hardt and Negri there is no such identifiable agent,” adding that “In more Foucaultian fashion, an amorphous empire seems to be a ubiquitous but faceless power structure that is everywhere yet centred nowhere” (2007, p. 131).

Some authors have missed the subtlety of the differences that exist between the approach of Hardt and Negri with more nuanced approaches for theorizing global capitalism. Sociologist Sakellariopoulos (2007) references Hardt and Negri’s notion of empire alongside Robinson’s notion of an emergent TNS. He writes, “There is a common element in all the abovementioned views: their claim is that in the present phase of globalization the state is weakened. It is not effaced; it retains some of its past prerogatives. But it ceases to be the agent par excellence of political

power. Modification of the functions of the state are seen to coincide with undermining of its general role through transfer of powers from the national to the international or supranational level” (Sakellaropoulos, 2007, p. 13). This argument misses the nuance of Robinson’s theory. Robinson in his theorizing of a nascent TNS and transnational state apparatuses never claims that the national state “has weakened,” or that power has been transferred. Rather, he explains that his notion provides a useful analytical abstraction for considering how the functionality of many state institutions worldwide is transforming in relation to the practices and ideologies of elites operating in and through state institutions, from “within” and from “without” (tied increasingly to circuits of global, rather than national capital accumulation) (Robinson, 2010; Sprague, 2012a in Ritzer, 2012).

In another example, in which the important differences of these theoretical approaches go overlooked, Sociologist Yildiz Atasoy refers to Hardt and Negri: “They foresee a decline in the sovereign power of states, gradually giving way to ‘empire’ emerging as a new form of sovereignty expressed in ‘global constitutionalism’ under the influence of a ‘transnational capitalist ruling-class’ (Sklair, 1991[1995], 2001)” (Atasoy, 2009, p. 3). Atasoy cites Sklair here, suggesting that Hardt and Negri utilize Sklair’s understanding of a TCC. But Hardt and Negri never discuss such a class. They never discuss such a social basis for the changes undergone through globalization. The difference is that the approach of Harris, Jayasuriya, Robinson, Sklair, and others does not offer a speculative theory of the present, something Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri do to some extent, but rather present objective analyses of actual social processes. At its best, the global capitalism school’s theoretical enterprise pushes us to consider globalization through the ways with which it unfolds rooted in social relations. It is rare to find a book of radical theory as engaging and having such an impact as *Empire*, and while it might be banal to expect empirical depth to Hardt and Negri’s manifesto, it is clear that more nuanced understandings of global capitalism exist.

In moving forward and looking at the changes that social groups and institutions are undergoing around the world, for example, with the growing transnationality of some class fractions and strata, it is important we analyze these processes in a clear manner. It is important we understand how social groups conflict and connect with one another and the world around them. It is important to understand more clearly the specific ways in which nationally oriented social groups converge or clash with those that have become more thoroughly transnational.⁷ In other areas, more work can be done as well. For example, while important studies have examined

today's circuits of global capitalist production (Dicken, 2007; Sprague, 2011a), more work on transnational finance and the ways in which it relates to social groups are particularly important for shining a light on the nature of the system.

A diversity of social theories has emerged to describe the modern interaction of humanity with the world around it. This chapter has not sought to go over the large cluster of realist theories that are utilized for understanding this system. It has not gone over the numerous realist influenced schools of thought that exist for understanding world capitalism in its present stage. Instead, this chapter has focused in on a set of approaches that emphasize the novelty of global capitalism through its associated social relations.

The rationale here is that much of the theorizing on globalization remains deeply impoverished and reflects the zombie language of Westphalian state centric analysis. As such this chapter suggests that we seek to theorize and analyze global capitalism in the context of shifting class relations alongside concomitant political and economic changes. Dominant realist modes of analysis often reflect the assumption that the world is mainly just moving toward a form of nation-state multilateralism, returning us to old-fashioned geopolitics. Some scholars see these changes as propelled by national groups that are engaging in international processes. Yet, this chapter stands upon the idea that the deep changes occurring through globalization require that we recalibrate the way in which we view our world. This chapter has sought to pull apart the ways in which some distinct theories attempt to do this.

To recapitulate, this chapter has examined some insightful and problematic ideas within *Empire* and looked at these in relation to some sociological and neo-Marxian approaches that also seek to understand global capitalism as a novel epoch in the history of world capitalism. In contrast to other works of the "global capitalism school," Hardt and Negri get caught up in a Foucauldian framework ignoring the locations and specificities of social forces through which power congeals. To take this discussion forward, finishing with the scholastic debate on the implications of the ideas deployed in *Empire*, we should continue with studies of transformative processes through globalization but in relation to the social forces that undergird them.

NOTES

1. Eakin (2001) for the *New York Times* suggested *Empire* was "the Next Big Idea"; praise echoed by PBS' Charlie Rose in his interview with Michael Hardt (Rose, 2001).

2. What this FT report does not explain is that financial markets and chains of production are increasingly transnational, making it more and more difficult to strictly identify these companies with a nation-state.

3. For an important study that looks in part at the role of transnational elites operating through a national state apparatus in coercing workers for global markets, see Robyn Magalit Rodriguez's (2010) analysis of the labor brokerage activities of Philippine state strata (Sprague, 2011b).

4. See Bowring (2004) for an in-depth explanation of Negri and the Italian autonomist school's distinct reading of Marx's theory of formal and real subsumption of labor.

5. Foucault supported struggles that he saw as unencumbered by totalizing western ideologies. For example, he saw in the Iranian revolution of 1979 a spontaneous and organic struggle, one which he supported and promoted in its early stages (Afary & Anderson, 2005).

6. Scholars such as Sartre (1988) have made the distinction between the revolutionary and the rebel, explaining that the former looks beyond the present state of affairs with no attachment to it; the latter needs existing society as much as those empowered by it.

7. Dahms (2008) emphasizes that social scientists through theory must be able to acquire the ability to focus on *specific* relations and circumstances.

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