

LINEAGES OF EMPIRE
by
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I

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's Empire¹ is a powerful antidote against the gloom, suspicion and hostility that have characterized the predominant reaction of the radical left to the advent of so-called globalization. While excoriating its destructive aspects, Hardt and Negri welcome globalization as the dawn of a new era full of promise for the realization of the desires of the wretched of the earth. In the same way that Marx insisted on the progressive nature of capitalism in comparison with the forms of society it displaced, they now claim that Empire is a great improvement over the world of nation-states and competing imperialisms that preceded it.

Empire is the new logic and structure of rule that has emerged with the globalization of economic and cultural exchanges. It is the sovereign power that effectively regulates these global exchanges and thereby governs the world. Unlike empires of pre-modern and modern times, the singular Empire of post-modern times has no territorial boundaries/frontiers or center of power. It is a decentered and detrterritorialized apparatus of rule that incorporates the entire global realm.

The establishment of this new logic and structure of rule has gone hand in hand with “the realization of the world market and the real subsumption of global society under capital.” The world of nation-states and competing imperialisms of modern times “served the needs and

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furthered the interests of capital in its phase of global conquest.” At the same time, however, it created and reinforced rigid boundaries... that effectively blocked the free flow of capital, labor and goods—thus necessarily precluding the full realization of the world market” (p. 332). As capital realizes itself in the world market, it “tends toward a smooth space defined by uncoded flows, flexibility, continual modulation, and tendential equalization” (p. 327).

The idea of Empire as a “smooth space” is a central theme of the book. The smoothing does not just affect the division of the world into nation-states and their empires, merging and blending the distinct national colors “in the imperial global rainbow.” Most significant, it affects its division into First, Second and Third Worlds, North and South, core and periphery. While the Second World has disappeared, the Third World “enters into the First, establishes itself at the heart as the ghetto, shanty town, favela.” The First World, in turn, “is transferred to the Third in the form of stock exchanges and banks, transnational corporations and icy skyscrapers of money and command.” As a result, “center and periphery, North and South no longer define an international order but rather have moved closer to one another” (pp. xiii, 253-4, 334-7).

As in most accounts of globalization, Hardt and Negri trace its origins to the new power that the computer and information revolution has put in the hands of capital. By making it possible “to link together different groups of labor in real time across the world,” the revolution enabled capital “to weaken the structural resistances of labor power” and “to impose both temporal flexibility and spatial mobility.” Speculative and financial capital strengthen the tendency by going “where the price of labor is lowest and where the administrative force to guarantee exploitation is highest.” As a result, “the countries that still maintain the rigidities of labor and oppose its full flexibility and mobility are punished, tormented, and finally destroyed”

(pp. 337-8).

In contrast to most accounts of globalization, however, Hardt and Negri do not conceive of the forces of labor as the more or less reluctant recipients of the tendencies of capital. On the one hand, proletarian struggles “caused directly” the capitalist crisis of the late 1960's and early 1970's, and thus “forced capital to modify its own structures and undergo a paradigm shift” (p. 261).

If the Vietnam War had not taken place, if there had not been worker and student revolts in the 1960's, if there had not been 1968 and the second wave of the women's movements, if there had not been the whole series of anti-imperialist struggles, capital would have been content to maintain its own arrangement of power.... It would have been content for several good reasons: because the natural limits of development served it well; because it was threatened by the development of immaterial labor; because it knew that the transversal mobility and hybridization of world labor power opened the potential for new crises and class conflicts on an order never before experienced. The restructuring of production... was anticipated by the rise of a new subjectivity.... it was driven from below, by a proletariat whose composition had already changed. (pp. 275-6)

On the other hand, this new proletariat—or “multitude,” as Hardt and Negri call it—promptly seized the new opportunities of empowerment and liberation created by globalization. The key practice in this respect has been migration. “The multitude's resistance to bondage—the struggle against the slavery of belonging to a nation, an identity, and a people, and thus the desertion from sovereignty and the limits it places on subjectivity—is entirely positive.... The real heroes of the liberation of the Third World today may really have been the emigrants and the flows of population that have destroyed old and new boundaries” (pp. 361-3). The multitude is thus both protagonist and beneficiary of the destruction of boundaries that marks the coming of Empire.

Moreover, the very globalization of capital's networks of production and control empowers each and every point of revolt. Horizontal articulations among struggles—and hence

the mediation of leaders, unions and parties—are no longer needed. “Simply by focusing their own powers, concentrating their energies in a tense and compact coil... struggles strike directly at the highest articulations of imperial order” (pp. 56-9).

As Hardt and Negri recognize, this double empowerment of the multitude under Empire leaves open the fundamental question of what kind of political program can enable the multitude to cross and breakdown the limits that imperial initiatives continually re-establish on its desire of liberation. All they can say at this point is that global citizenship (papiers pour tous!) is a first element of such a program, followed by a second element: a social wage and a guaranteed income for all individuals. “Once [global] citizenship is extended to all, we could call this guaranteed income a citizenship income, due each as a member of [world] society” (pp. 399-403).

This is probably the most optimistic picture of the nature and consequences of globalization proposed thus far by the radical left. The author’s endeavor to do away with any nostalgia for the power structures of an earlier era of capitalist development is in my view commendable. And so is their endeavor to show that the emerging logic and structure of world rule is both a response to past struggles of the exploited and oppressed and a more favorable terrain than previous structures for ongoing struggles against new forms of exploitation and oppression. There are nonetheless serious problems with the way Hardt and Negri pursue these commendable endeavors.

Most problems arise from Hardt and Negri’s heavy reliance on metaphors and theories and systematic avoidance of empirical evidence. While many readers will undoubtedly be taken in by the erudition deployed throughout the book, more skeptical readers will be put off by

statements of fact unbacked by empirical evidence or, worse still, easily falsifiable on the basis of widely available evidence. I will limit myself to two crucial examples, one concerning the “smoothness” of the space of Empire, and the other concerning the role of the contemporary mobility of labor and capital in equalizing conditions of production and reproduction across that space.

It is hard to question that the disappearance of the Second World makes it anachronistic to continue to speak of a First and a Third World. There is also plenty of evidence that the signs of modernity associated with the wealth of the former First World (Hardt and Negri’s “icy skyscrapers of money and command”) have proliferated in the former Third World; and it may also be the case that the signs of marginalization associated with the poverty of the former Third World are now more prominent in the former First World than they were twenty or thirty years ago. Nevertheless, it does not follow from all this that the distance between the poverty of the former Third World (or South) and the wealth of the former First World (or North) has decreased to any significant extent. Indeed, all available evidence show an extraordinary persistence of the North-South income gap as measured by GNP per capita. Suffice it to mention that in 1999 the average per capita income of former “Third World” countries was only 4.6 % of the per capita income of former “First World” countries, that is, almost exactly what it was in 1960 (4.5 %) and in 1980 (4.3 %). Indeed, if we exclude China from the calculation, the percentage shows a steady decrease from 6.4 in 1960, to 6.0 in 1980 and 5.5 in 1999 (calculated from World Bank 1984 and 2001).

Hardt and Negri’s assertion of an ongoing supersession of the North-South divide is thus

clearly false. Also flawed are their assertions concerning the direction and extent of contemporary flows of capital and labor. For one thing, they grossly exaggerate the extent to which these flows are unprecedented. This is especially true of their dismissal of nineteenth century migrations as “lilliputian” compared to their late-twentieth century counterparts. Proportionately speaking, nineteenth century flows were in fact much larger, especially if we include migrations within and from Asia (Held et al 1999, chapter 6). Moreover, the assertion that speculative and financial capital has been going “where the price of labor is lowest and where the administrative force to guarantee exploitation is highest” is only in small part true. It is true, that is, only if we hold all kinds of other things equal, first and foremost per-capita national income. But most other things (and especially per-capita national income) are not at all equal among the world’s regions and jurisdictions. As a result, by far the largest share of capital flows is between wealthy countries (where the price of labor is comparatively high and the administrative force to guarantee exploitation comparatively low) with relatively little capital actually flowing from wealthy to poor countries.

These are not the only statements of fact in the narrative of Empire that on close inspection turn out to be false. They are nonetheless among the most crucial for the credibility not just of the book’s reconstruction of present tendencies but for its political conclusions as well. For Hardt and Negri’s optimism concerning the opportunities that globalization opens up for the liberation of the multitude largely rests on their assumption that capital under Empire tends towards a double equalization of the conditions of existence of the multitude: equalization through capital mobility from North to South and equalization through labor mobility from South to North. But if these mechanisms are not operative—as for the time being they do not appear to

be--the road to global citizenship and to a guaranteed income for all citizens may be far longer, bumpier and more treacherous than Hardt and Negri would like us to believe.

II

I will deal with the possible configuration(s) of this bumpy and treacherous long march by responding to Hardt and Negri's criticism of my own account of the evolution of historical capitalism in early modern and modern times. Hardt and Negri include me among the authors who "prepare[d] the terrain for the analysis and critique of Empire" (p. 471 n 5). At the same time, they single out my reconstruction of systemic cycles of accumulation in The Long Twentieth Century (Arrighi 1994) as an instance of cyclical theories of capitalism that obscure the novelty of contemporary transformations ("[f]rom imperialism to Empire and from the nation-state to the political regulation of the global market") as well as the driving force of those transformations (a "[c]lass struggle [that], pushing the nation-state towards its abolition and thus going beyond the barriers posed by it, proposes the constitution of Empire as the site of analysis and conflict") (pp. 237-8). More specifically, in their view

in the context of Arrighi's cyclical argument it is impossible to recognize a rupture of the system, a paradigm shift, an event. Instead, everything must always return, and the history of capitalism thus becomes the eternal return of the same. In the end such a cyclical analysis masks the motor of the process of crisis and restructuring.... [I]t seems that the crisis of the 1970s was simply part of the objective and inevitable cycles of capitalist accumulation, rather than the result of proletarian and anticapitalist attack both in the dominant and in the subordinated countries. The accumulation of these struggles was the motor of the crisis, and they determined the terms and nature of capitalist restructuring.... We have to recognize where in the transnational networks of production, the circuits of the world market, and the global structures of capitalist rule there is the potential for rupture and the motor for a future that is not simply doomed to repeat the past cycles of capitalism. (p. 239)

I find this assessment curious for two reasons. One is that for thirty years I have been

advancing a thesis about the crisis of the 1970's that in many respects resembles what according to Hardt and Negri The Long Twentieth Century obscures. And the other is that, although The Long Twentieth Century does construct cycles, its argument is not at all cyclical, nor does it contradict my earlier thesis about the crisis of the 1970's. It simply puts that thesis in a longer historical perspective. Let me deal with each of these two issues in turn.

In an article first published in Italian in 1972 I pointed out some crucial differences between the incipient capitalist crisis of the 1970's and the crises of 1873-1896 and of the 1930's. The most important among these differences was the role of workers' struggles in precipitating the crisis of the 1970's. I further maintained that this and other differences meant that the incipient crisis was less likely than the earlier crises to result in an intensification of inter-imperialist rivalries and a consequent break up of the world market. Rather, the crisis could be expected to result in a strengthening of the unity of the world market and of the tendency towards the decentralization of industrial production towards capitalistically "less developed" regions of the global economy (Arrighi [1972] 1978).

In The Geometry of Imperialism, published six years later, I carried this analysis one step further. Not only did I underscore again that the kind of world-economic integration via direct investment that had developed under US hegemony was less likely to break down in a generalized state of war among capitalist powers than the kind of world-economic integration via commodity and financial flows typical of nineteenth-century British hegemony. In addition, I pointed out that workers' struggles consolidated this new forms of world-economic integration and suggested that over time the consolidation could be expected to weaken nation-states as the primary form of political organization of world capitalism (Arrighi 1983 [1978], 146-8). It

followed from this argument that the very theories of “imperialism” that had been most successful in predicting trends in the first half of the twentieth century (most notably, Hobson 1932 [1902]; Hilferding 1981 [1910]; and Lenin 1952 [1916]) had become hopelessly obsolete. These theories had become obsolete for the simple reason that world capitalism as instituted under US hegemony was no longer generating the tendency towards war among capitalist powers that constituted their specific *explanandum*. And to the extent that the system of nation-states was actually ceasing to be the primary form of political organization of world capitalism, the obsolescence of these theories would become permanent (Arrighi 1983 [1978], 149-173).

Twelve years later (Arrighi 1990) I recast these arguments in an account of the “long” twentieth century that focused on the rise of the world labor movement in the late nineteenth century, the bifurcation of the movement into social-democratic and Marxist trajectories in the early twentieth century, the success of workers struggles along both trajectories in provoking a fundamental, “reformist” reorganization of world capitalism under US hegemony at the end of the Second World War, and the crisis that both kinds of movements faced in the 1980's as the unintended consequence of their previous successes. As in Hardt and Negri's similar story, I diagnosed this crisis--including and especially the crisis of Marxism as instituted in the first half of the twentieth century--as a positive rather than a negative development for the future of the world proletariat. Whereas Marxism had developed historically in a direction antithetical to the one foreseen and advocated by Marx, I argued, ongoing transformations of world capitalism--first and foremost the unprecedented degree of integration of the global market--were making Marx's predictions and prescriptions for the present and future of the world labor movement more rather than less relevant.

Starting from different premises and following a different line of argument I thus reached conclusions very similar to one of the central theses of Empire. Unlike Hardt and Negri, I nonetheless qualified these conclusions with a warning against excessive confidence in the Marxian scheme of things.

For in one major respect the Marxian scheme itself remains seriously defective--namely in the way in which it deals with the role of age, sex, race, nationality, religion and other natural and historical specificities in shaping the social identity of the world proletariat.... To be sure, the cost-cutting race of the [1970's and 1980's] has provided compelling evidence in support of [Marx's] observation that for capital all members of the proletariat are instruments of labor, more or less expensive to use according to their age, sex, color, nationality, religion, etc. However, it has also shown that one cannot infer, as Marx does, from this predisposition of capital a predisposition of labor to relinquish natural and historical differences as means of affirming, individually and collectively, a distinctive social identity. Whenever faced with the predisposition of capital to treat labor as an undifferentiated mass with no individuality other than a differential capability to augment the value of capital, proletarians have rebelled. Almost invariably they have seized upon or created anew whatever combination of distinctive traits (age, sex, color, assorted geo-historical specificities) they could use to impose on capital some kind of special treatment. As a consequence, patriarchalism, racism and national-chauvinism have been integral to the making of the world labor movement along both trajectories, and live on in one form or another in most proletarian ideologies and organizations. (Arrighi 1990, 63; emphasis in the original)

Even before completing The Long Twentieth Century, I was thus far less sanguine than Hardt and Negri about the possibility that under the emerging condition of world-market integration, proletarian "exit" (South-North migrations) and "voice" (struggles against exploitation, exclusion and oppression) would promote greater solidarity, equality and democracy across national, civilizational, racial and gender divides. It seems to me that the 1990's have provided plenty of evidence both against the idealized and idealistic view of the multitude that Hardt and Negri advance in Empire, and in favor of my earlier warning that intensifying competition in the global market--including and especially intensification through labor migration--could well strengthen the patriarchalist, racist and national-chauvinist

dispositions of the world proletariat. This is a first important reason why in my view the road to global citizenship and to a guaranteed income for all citizens can be expected to be far longer, bumpier and more treacherous than Hardt and Negri maintain.

Other equally important reasons have to do with Hardt and Negri's idealized and idealistic view, not just of the multitude, but of capital and Empire as well. It is in this connection that their misreading of my reconstruction of systemic cycles of accumulation becomes relevant. For the reconstruction neither prevents a recognition of systemic ruptures and paradigm shifts, nor describes the history of capitalism as an eternal return of the same, nor masks the motor of the process of crisis and restructuring, as Hardt and Negri maintain. Indeed, it does exactly the opposite by showing that, world-historically, systemic ruptures and paradigm shifts occur precisely when the "same" (in the form of recurrent system-wide financial expansions) appears to (and in a sense actually does) return. Moreover, by comparing successive periods of return/rupture, it shows how the motor of crisis and restructuring (as well as the agency of capitalist expansion) has changed over time, making the present crisis novel in key respects.

More specifically, the reconstruction of systemic cycles of accumulation serves a double purpose. First, it serves the purpose of identifying the distinguishing features of world capitalism as an historical (as opposed to an idea-typical) social system. And second, it serves the purpose of identifying what is truly new in the present condition of world capitalism in the light of its entire life history, as opposed to what may appear new in the light of some temporally or spatially partial view of that history. It seems to me that these two identifications are essential to an historically grounded recognition--to paraphrase Hardt and Negri's previously quoted

passage--of where in the global structures of capitalist rule there is the potential for rupture and the motor for a future that is not simply doomed to repeat the past cycles of capitalism. Such an historically grounded recognition does not so much contradict (though in part it does) as it adds important new dimensions to my earlier and Hardt and Negri's present assessment of the emergent condition of world rule. Let me briefly mention the most important of these new dimensions.

First, while confirming the plausibility of the contention that a world state (which I have no objections to calling "Empire") is in formation, my reconstruction of systemic cycles of accumulation adds both a temporal scale and an element of uncertainty to the ongoing transition from a phase of world history based on national states to a possible but by no means certain world-state phase. As The Long Twentieth Century and subsequent work on hegemonic transitions show, world capitalism was originally embedded in a system of city-states and the transition from the city-state phase to the nation-state phase of capitalism stretched over several centuries. For at least two centuries of this transition, city-states (most notably Venice) or business diasporas originating in city-states (most notably the Genoese) remained protagonists of the capitalist dynamic, while the leading agency of the transition itself was a state (the United Provinces) that combined characteristics of the declining city-states and of the rising nation-states (Arrighi 1994, 11, 36-47, 82-158; Arrighi and Silver et al 1999, 37-58). Although we also noted a certain acceleration in the pace of world-systemic transformations, past experience seems to suggest that the present transition from the nation-state to a world-state phase of world rule will take at least a century to complete. It also suggests that at least some national states or hybrid forms of nation- and world-state may be protagonists of the transition.

Second, much of the uncertainty surrounding ongoing transformations derives from the fact that past periods of financial expansion and hegemonic transition have been moments of increasing instability and unintended capitalist self-destructiveness. Although a major factor of past instability and self-destructiveness (inter-imperialist wars) is unlikely to intervene, the attempt of today's declining hegemonic power (the United States) to impose on the world an exploitative domination may well become a more important source of instability and self-destructiveness than similar attempts by its predecessors (Arrighi and Silver 2001, 976-9, 982-3). Thus, paraphrasing Joseph Schumpeter (1954, 163), The Long Twentieth Century concluded that "before humanity chokes (or basks) in the dungeon (or paradise) of a post-capitalist world empire or of a post-capitalist world market society, it may well burn up in the horrors (or glories) of the escalating violence that has accompanied the liquidation of the Cold War world order" (Arrighi 1994, 356)

Third, a comparison of the present with past transitions does confirm the historically novel role that proletarian and anti-capitalist struggles, both in the dominant and subordinate countries, have played in precipitating the crisis of the 1970's. Indeed, in a very real sense the present financial expansion (unlike previous similar expansions) has been primarily an instrument--to paraphrase Immanuel Wallerstein (1995: 25)--of the containment of the combined demands of the peoples of the non-Western world (for relatively little per person but for a lot of people) and of the Western working classes (for relatively few people but for quite a lot per person). At the same time, however, the financial expansion and associated restructuring of the global political economy have had considerable success in disorganizing the social forces that were the bearers of these demands in the upheavals of the late 1960's and 1970's. Integral to this

success has been the reproduction of the North-South income divide which, as previously noted, is as large today as it was twenty or forty years ago. It is hard to believe that this huge and persistent divide will not continue to play a decisive role in shaping, not just proletarian identities and dispositions North and South, but also processes of world-state formation. As the implosion of the World Trade Organization talks in Seattle has shown in exemplary fashion, the struggle over the social orientation of the emerging world-state is as much a struggle between North and South as it is between capital and labor. Indeed, since the possessors of capital continue to be overwhelmingly concentrated in the North, while a vast and ever-growing majority of the world's proletariat is concentrated in the South, the two struggles are in good part obverse sides of the same coin (Silver and Arrighi 2001; Silver forthcoming).

Finally, while the overall North-South divide has remained remarkably stable, over the last forty years there has been a major relocation of manufacturing activities and world market shares from North America and Western Europe to East Asia. Thus, between 1960 and 1999 the East Asian share of world value added (a good measure of the share of the world market controlled by the residents of the region) increased from 13% to 25.9%, while the North American share decreased from 35.2% to 29.8% and the Western European share decreased from 40.5% to 32.3%. Even more significant was the shift in the shares of world value added in manufacturing, with the East Asian share increasing in the same period from 16.4% to 35.2%, against a decrease in the North American share from 42.2% to 29.9% and of the Western European share from 32.4% to 23.4% (all percentages calculated from World Bank 1984 and 2001). It is hardly plausible that shifts of this order will not affect the constitution of Empire, particularly in view of the fact that East Asia has a much longer history of state and market

formation than Europe and North America (Arrighi and Silver 1999, ch. 4). And yet, Hardt and Negri focus exclusively on the Euro-American lineages of Empire and do not even entertain the possibility of their hybridization with Asian lineages.

In short, Empire may indeed to be in the making, but if it is, it may well take a century or more before humanity will know whether its constitution has succeeded or failed, and if it has succeeded, what its social and cultural contents will be. In the meantime, all we can hope for is that the ruling classes of the declining and rising centers of the global economy deploy in their actions a greater intelligence than they have done so far; that proletarian struggles shun patriarchalist, racist and national-chauvinistic temptations; and that activists and intellectuals of good will develop a better understanding of where Empire is coming from and where it can and cannot go.

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