

*Empire*

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri

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A concern for the concept of empire is important for anyone engaged in contemporary political philosophy, at the very least as a way to challenge either the metaphysical commitments of a state-centric political philosophy or the images of a global, corporate economic system that is assumed to be just, if not benevolent. While *Empire* is an interesting contribution to discussions of this term, the book is not an easy read. Unashamedly Marxist, the central goal of the work is to update Marx for the post-cold war period, and specifically for a time when the conflicts between states have become conflicts within a single global system, which the authors call “empire.”

The basic argument in the book is relatively simple: the days of state- and nation-centered capitalism are over, capitalism has become global, and so the emancipatory struggles of the 21st century will not be fought over state power, but over the expansive, malleable terrain that has connected the entire globe into a single network. As they write:

“With the decline of national boundaries, the world market is liberated from the kind of binary divisions that nation-states had imposed, and in this new free space a myriad of differences appears. These differences of course do not play freely across a smooth global space, but rather are regimented in global networks of power consisting of highly differentiated and mobile structures.” (page 151)

The contemporary global organization is fundamentally different from forms of imperialism and domination that characterized earlier periods of capitalism. As they write: “Empire is the political subject that effectively regulates these global

exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world.” (page xi) What this suggests, among other things, is that there has been a shift in “sovereignty” from the state to empire, from spatially limited governments to a single global system where there is no center of power, although, as they frequently point out, power is also not distributed evenly.

The distribution of power in empire is organized in terms of legal, political, economic, and biopolitical systems. Capitalism dominates the globe, but to do so, it not only builds factories and obtains mineral rights, it must also create suitable kinds of subjectivity and organize appropriate social and political structures. Everything has to fit together.

“The source of imperial normativity is born of a new machine, a new economic-industrial-communicative machine — in short, a globalized biopolitical machine.” (page 40)

The focus on empire as a machine evokes a series of contemporary political theorists, from Foucault to Deleuze and Guattari. Unlike imperialism, which was based on a politics of command, contemporary empire is based on a combination of discipline and function. In effect, the authors are arguing that the 19th century forms of empire were based on 17th century accounts of sovereignty (as command), while the 20th century forms of empire are based on 19th century accounts of sovereignty (as discipline and function). Bentham’s panopticon has become the image of the post-modern global order.

The authors accept a largely uncontroversial and somewhat simplistic account of modern global politics. They do not consider, for instance, the global organization of power before the 19th century — in the centuries before nations — or alternatives that were either competing or complementing the nation-state during the 19th century — cosmopolitanism, humanism, racism and so on. How does the proliferation of national identities in the 19th century connect (through

European exploration and the expansion details articulated within the imperial archive) to the binary oppositions that are analysed in terms of Orientalism? or how does the European system of nation-states relate to the global empires in the 19th century? Of course, the book is not designed to offer a subtle analysis of the 19th century, but to connect two general periods: the modern and postmodern, and thus to mark the move from spatially limited national identities to global flows of multiple (or fragmented?) identities. But the simplification of history remains awkward.

The shift from modern to post-modern global systems, from imperialism to empire, is connected to the emergence of new political projects. Hardt and Negri are calling for a globalized rearticulation of the basic conflict between labour and capital. To emphasize this goal, the authors point to the distinction between unions and the proletariat, the unions being a privileged and spatially limited group within a global proletariat, who must collectively become the primary agent of political change. The core of *Empire*, then, becomes the latest reiteration of a well-worn Marxist narrative. Describing the book in this way, however, is not to argue that the narrative is incorrect; but the overall coherence of the book depends on the reader accepting this narrative. In the end, the book is primarily written for a small group of largely American and largely left-wing academics.

So be it. Most books can be criticized as being focused on a small group of intellectuals, and those that cannot are often vacuously general. Throughout the book, too many theorists are invoked in ways that assumes familiarity, as if the bibliography is not only a list of sources, but also a list of books that have to be read before the present book can make sense. Putting this another way, while the book attempts to articulate a post-modern concept of empire, it also attempts to consolidate a wide range of current academic debates into a single master narrative, in which post-modernism, post-colonialism, Foucault, Bhabha, and Jameson are all given a place, either as symptomatic or prescient. In the end, the book itself becomes

a textual example of the post-modern empire, where every author is disciplined to fit into the structure in a specific way, and to serve a specific function in the overall network.

While the book is polemical, and typically reads as an extended manifesto, there are also aspects of the book that the authors have made both interesting and analytically useful, which are not necessarily connected either to the Marxist master narrative or to dominant themes in contemporary political philosophy.

Some readers may take the discussion in *Empire* to be a criticism of postmodern thought, insofar as postmodernism conforms to the emerging economic order, pace Jameson, but the authors also appeal to post-modern discussions of identity to help them articulate the nature of identity politics within empire. One theme that merits some attention is the discussion of Foucault's analysis of panopticism, and his subsequent discussion of sexuality and governmentality. Foucault's work offers key images for articulating the political structures (governance rather than command) and identity structures (fragmented, flexible) that characterize the post-modern empire. Postmodern society is not the end of identity, but rather its rearticulation in relation to a new economic system.

Another interesting theme in the book is the distinction the authors make between imperialism and empire. With imperialism, one state dominates the economic, political, and spiritual lives of someone else (a region, a nation, and so on). The division between colonizer and colonized is generally clear, and the colonizers are typically led by a single power, such as Britain in the 19th century and the United States in most of the 20th. With empire, on the other hand, sovereignty shifts from specific state-entities to global institutions and structures, such as the United Nations, the IMF and so on. As the authors argue:

“The United States does not, and indeed no nation-state can today, form the center of an imperialist project. Imperialism is over. No

nation will be world leader in the way modern European nations were.” (page xiv)

On the one hand, the general pattern of this argument is not a new. The decline of state sovereignty and the rise of the global power structures has been discussed for decades. The value of the discussion here is twofold: first by offering an interesting, if largely semantic, discussion of how the shift should be articulated, and second by tying the emerging global order to questions of labour and justice.

But if it is important to theorize empire, one of the things that is noticeably absent in *Empire* is a concern for the 19th century discussions of the global political system. The discussion leaps from the 17th century state-theorists (such as Hobbes and Locke) to the contemporary post-modern and post-colonial thinkers. Not only does this heighten the clarity of the narrative’s periodization, it also simplifies the character of the 19th century empires (understanding them as clearly defined European nation-states that have come to dominate foreign regions). The authors point to the role of international law, and thus the value of consistency, in the contemporary order, but fail to note how universal moral codes, international law, global agreements, and even international institutions, existed before the United Nations. Of course, the increased importance of international institutions is an important feature of the current global order, but that does not mean that there were no relevant international institutions in earlier periods.

A third interesting theme in *Empire* is the connection that the authors make between the post-modern empire and the political principles of early American political thought, and specifically the way that the mechanical organization of the government allows for hybrid identities and expanding frontiers. The empire has become a machine that is similar to the machine created by the federalists and the framers of the U.S. constitution. Rather than basing a political system on a monolithic image of sovereignty, the American political system is based on the “interaction of powers linked together in networks” (page 162). As a result, the

postmodern empire has no center, and rather than being the empire of a particular nation, it has become a structured and self-regulating terrain on which conflicts occur.

By clarifying the difference between 19th and 20th century forms of global power, the authors thus attempt to reshape the terms of emancipatory politics. If the empire is the final stage of global capitalism, then the global republic is the only viable alternative that would promote human dignity and freedom. The problem, of course, is how to oppose an empire dominated by capitalist interests. The authors offer several responses, which include the creation of equally global institutions that promote alternative politics and the promotion of a direct refusal to participate in the disciplinary systems on which the empire depends. As a result, both NGOs and dressing in drag become part of a liberation politics, which can challenge the norms of global capital. And so it is still possible for the workers of the world to unite, and overthrow the capitalist order. If anything, the conditions for the overthrow are that much more developed. If, that is, you accept the ontological commitments that underlie the authors' optimism.