



## Immaterial Labour and World Order: An Evaluation of a Thesis\*

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### abstract

This paper argues that Hardt and Negri's claim that immaterial labour is becoming hegemonic, in the sense that is informing and influencing other forms of production and social life itself, goes some considerable way towards providing a theoretical framework within which we can make sense of the current and ongoing processes of transformation within the global political economy. It will be argued, however, that whilst many of the criticisms which have been levied at Hardt and Negri's work have been based, to an extent, upon a failure to comprehend the *tendential* nature of their argument, there nevertheless exist a number of real and important weaknesses in their work. In particular, it will be argued that the potential power of Hardt and Negri's revolutionary subject, 'the multitude', is over-stated in their work.

We are amidst a process of global transformation. Within the most advanced capitalist economies at least, many of the icons of the Fordist era have been steadily disappearing: mass productive processes geared towards providing cheap, standardised commodities for mass markets; full employment; 'blue-collar' work; the welfare state; mass political parties and trade unions. Within the academy, in the media, and throughout popular culture more generally, the emergence of a 'post-Fordist', 'post-industrial' or 'post-modern' reality – alongside processes of 'globalisation' (variously conceived<sup>1</sup>) – have been widely debated.<sup>2</sup> A number of overlapping, yet nevertheless distinct, schools of thought have sought to develop a theoretical and analytic framework to make sense of: the (passing) Fordist era; the origins of its crisis; the shape of things to come; and the agents of these (ongoing) processes of change.

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1 See for example, Altvater and Mahnkopf (1999); Held and McGrew (2003); Hughes and Wilkinson (2002); and Scholte (2005). For an excellent critique of globalisation theory, see Rosenberg (2002 and 2005).

2 Amin's (1996) edited volume, upon which this section heavily draws, is the best introduction to the debate.

Most prominent within the debate have been the ‘regulation school’<sup>3</sup> which set out to explain the paradox within capitalism between its tendency towards crisis, instability and change, and its ability, nevertheless, to reproduce itself by coalescing around a set of rules, norms and institutions which serve to secure relatively long periods of economic stability (Amin, 1996: 7). They have done so primarily through the concepts of ‘regime of accumulation’ and ‘mode of regulation’. Regime of accumulation refers to a “set of regularities at the level of the whole economy”, such as norms pertaining to the organisation of work and production, and of demand and consumption, “enabling a more or less coherent process of capital accumulation” (Nielson, 1991: 22). Mode of regulation, on the other hand, describes the institutions and conventions which reproduce and regulate a given regime of accumulation through a range of laws, political practices, industrial codes, and so on (Amin, 1996: 8). Structural crises, such as that which is said to have ensued alongside the recessions and the slow-down of growth that have characterised the world economy since the mid-1970s, are said to arise from the breakdown of the set of norms and rules central to these concepts (Amin, 1996: 10).

A second key school of thought within the debate is the so-called ‘flexible specialisation’ approach. This school, associated primarily with the work of Piore and Sabel (1984) and Hirst and Zeitlin (e.g.1991), argues that ‘mass production’ and ‘flexible specialisation’ have existed alongside each other since the nineteenth century. Sporadically, they argue, either mass production (conceived as the deployment of a semi-skilled workforce and purpose-built machinery to produce standardised commodities), or flexible specialisation (understood as a process by which a far more highly-skilled workforce are employed to produce a range of customised goods) become regarded as best practice. The history of capitalist development, according to this school, has been characterised by two such industrial divides. The first, at the beginning of the twentieth century, is said to have occurred, in part, as a result of the emergence of techniques and technologies which facilitated mass production, limiting the growth of craft industries in much of Europe. The second is understood as dating from the stagnation of the world economy in the mid-1970s, coupled with the crisis in US Fordism.<sup>4</sup>

The ‘neo-Schumpeterian approach’, the third of the key schools within the debate, in fact has much in common with the regulation school, differing primarily in its placing of a far greater emphasis on the role of technology. This school tends to argue that capitalist development is characterised by long waves of ‘boom’ and ‘bust’, with the smooth transition from one long wave of growth to another predicated on leaps in productivity being secured through the diffusion of new technologies, industrial processes, and/or the re-organisation of working practices throughout an economy. The crisis in Fordism, for neo-Schumpeterians such as Freeman (1982) and Perez (1986), is said to stem from the limits placed on productivity gains by prices, wages and the purported inefficiency of large corporations. The current failure to move into a new

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3 See in particular Bob Jessop’s edited five volume *Regulation Theory and the Crisis of Capitalism* (2001), containing some of the tradition’s most influential texts along with works by a number of the school’s staunchest critics. See also: Hirsch and Roth (1986) and Hirsch (1993).

4 Harvey’s (1990) work on the shift from Fordism to a regime of ‘flexible accumulation’ overlaps with this tradition.

long wave of economic growth is said to stem, in large part, from the failure of contemporary neoliberal governments to provide coordinated industrial policy action.

The Italian Marxist tradition of *Operaismo*, or ‘workerism’, represents a radical departure from these perspectives.<sup>5</sup> It operates a Copernican inversion of the standard approach to the study of the relation between labour and capital, in which labour is portrayed as the “passive, reactive victim” (Clever, 2000: 65) in relation to capital’s territorial expansion through imperialist and colonial projects, and developments at the point of production, such as those outlined above. Mario Tronti (1964), in a text which was enormously influential within the tradition, explained,

We too have worked with the concept that puts capitalist development first, and workers second. This is a mistake. And we now have to turn the problem on its head, reverse the polarity, and start from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class.

*Operaismo* can be located, as Dyer-Witheford (1999: 62-64) points out, within the tradition of so-called ‘class struggle’ or ‘subjectivist’ Marxism. He describes this tradition as spanning (despite interruptions) from Marx and Engels’ own work, through that of the theorists of the early-twentieth century council communist movement and moments in Luxemburg and Lukács’ thought; over CLR James, Raya Dunayevskaya and the Johnson Forest Tendency, to the work of groups such as *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in France and German theorists such as Karl Heinz Roth writing in the 1970s and 1980s. These approaches are posited in contrast to the ‘objectivist’, ‘one-sided Marxism’ (Dyer-Witheford, 1999: 63) of Soviet-style ‘scientific-socialism’ which Dyer-Witheford elsewhere describes as providing a linear account of the “mechanical progression through capitalism’s different levels or stages on the way to a final crisis caused by the inevitable declining rate of profit” (Dyer-Witheford, 2005: 137).

Overlapping in some ways with the work of the Frankfurt School, as well as Marx’s own work on technological domination, theorists such as Panzieri (e.g. 1961 and 1976) and Tronti developed a theoretical framework within which to analyse transformations in the means of production and the organisation of workers within the dynamics of class struggle, offering an account of capital’s technological evolution in terms of *a response to working-class struggles*.<sup>6</sup>

The notion of ‘class composition’ was developed by the tradition as a means of describing the relation between labour and capital at any particular historical moment. Forms of struggle, they argued, were expressed in terms of a particular ‘composition’ of the working class. Capital’s response to these struggles, then, involved imposing a number of changes designed to restore discipline, forcing a ‘decomposition’, which then

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5 Wright (2002) is the most comprehensive English-language overview of Italian workerism. Cleaver (2000: 58-77) offers a less comprehensive account of the tradition, but explains its interaction with similar tendencies within what he calls ‘Autonomist Marxism’. See also the recent German-language introduction to post-*Operaismo* (Birkner and Foltin, 2006) as well as Hardt and Virno’s (1996) anthology.

6 Marx himself made a similar claim in Volume I of *Capital*, arguing, “It would be possible to write a whole history of interventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of supplying capital with weapons against working class revolt” (1990: 563).

gave rise to new forms of struggle and, ultimately, a class ‘recomposition’. It was this analysis which was deployed by the theorists of *Operaismo* to explain capital’s response to the struggles of the so-called *operaio professionale* (the ‘professional worker’) which dominated the period up until the First World War. Capital’s dependence on these workers afforded them a degree of autonomy and authority, occupying a position of privilege over other, less highly skilled workers within the productive process.

In Russia this internal composition of the class led to the organization of factory soviets and ultimately to the vanguard party of classical Leninism, which constituted its highest political expression. The hierarchical structure of the soviets and the party corresponded to the hierarchical composition of the working class itself. (Murphey, 2005: xxxiv)

The Fordist/Taylorist restructuring of productive processes, as well as redistributive mechanisms enabled via the Keynesian welfare state, constituted the decomposition of *operaio professionale*. This in turn enabled a recomposition in the form of *operaio-massa* (or the ‘mass worker’).<sup>7</sup> *Operaio-massa* was largely unskilled, yet relatively well-paid and able to rely of the safety net of the welfare state. Its struggles tended to take the form of mass-based trade unionism and the widespread ‘refusal of work’, expressed in terms of absenteeism, sabotage and strike action.<sup>8</sup>

A number of *Operaismo*’s key theorists, and Antonio Negri in particular, have attempted to theorise the process of de- (and eventually re-)composition triggered by the ferocity of these struggles. Paolo Virno went so far as to describe the period of restructuring and the emergence of post-Fordism, as a ‘counter-revolution’ against the movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Virno, 1996b and 2004: 99). The decentralisation and flexibilisation of working practices were said to decompose both the technical structure of the mass worker’s labour process and the political organisations which expressed their demands (Murphey, 2005: xxxv). The focus of the *Operaisti* now (and this is the point at which some have argued that the era of post-*Operaismo* is to have emerged (e.g. Birkner and Foltin, 2006: 7)) became an examination of new forms of production and wealth opened up by the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s: the social, cultural and artistic activities performed outside the realm of waged labour.<sup>9</sup> As production escaped the confines of the factory walls, creating what Tronti had earlier called a ‘social factory’ (1963), the whole of society was said to become a potential (or actual) site of struggle. It is in this context that Negri and others began theorising the emergence of *operaio sociale* (or the ‘socialised worker’) (Negri, 2005a and b), in a line of analysis that he was later to develop with Michael Hardt in their discussions of immaterial labour and the multitude.<sup>10</sup>

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7 See Wright (2002: 176-196) and Hardt (2005: 7-37).

8 In the so-called Italian ‘Hot Autumn’ of 1969, five and a half million workers took part in strikes and hundreds of thousands occupied factories, committed acts of sabotage and participated in demonstrations (Katsiaficas, 1997: 19). See also Zerzan (1974) on the scale of what he calls the “revolt against work” in the US during the same period.

9 See in particular, Virno’s work on ‘artistic virtuosity’ (Virno, 1996a: 189-212; and 2004: 52-71) See also Hardt (2005).

10 It should be noted, however, that many of the debates within the Italian left in the 1970s were related to the validity or usefulness of this concept. See, for example, Bologna (2005) and Wright (2002: 152-175).

Hardt and Negri argue that the processes of economic and cultural globalisation which have taken place over the past few decades have been accompanied by “a transformation of the dominant productive processes... with the result that the role of industrial factory labour has been reduced and priority given instead to communicative, cooperative and affective labour” (2001: xiii). In other words, a shift has taken place in which ‘immaterial’ forms of labour now occupy a position of hegemony within the global political economy previously held by industrial labour. Hegemony, here, is understood as the ability of one form of production to inform and influence “other forms of labour and indeed society as a whole” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 65).

This paper will argue that Hardt and Negri’s claim as to the hegemony of immaterial labour provides a useful theoretical framework within which we can begin to make sense of a number of significant processes and transformations taking place throughout the global political economy up to the level of world order. It will also be argued that many of the criticisms made of Hardt and Negri’s work have been based, to a large extent, upon a failure to comprehend the *tendential* nature of their argument. However, it will also be made clear that there nevertheless exist a number of real and important weaknesses in Hardt and Negri’s work, related in particular to their claim as to the possibilities for radical social change opened up by these processes.

This paper is divided into four parts. Part One is dedicated to a detailed exposition of Hardt and Negri’s concept of immaterial labour, and the means by which it is argued as exerting its hegemony. The work of other theorists, such as Paolo Virno and Maurizio Lazzarato, who have explored similar phenomena, will also be touched upon. Part Two will describe the means by which, under the hegemony of immaterial labour, *networks* are said to be emerging as the dominant organisational form throughout society; including on the level of international power and organisation in the form of ‘Empire’. Part Three will attempt to set out some of the primary criticisms which have been made of Hardt and Negri’s analysis; along with an effort to illustrate how the failure of many of their critics to understand important aspects of their argument has led to a number of misunderstandings or misinterpretations, both in relation to the shift from the hegemony of industrial to immaterial labour, and from the era of imperialism to that of Empire. In the Fourth and final Part of this paper, I will set out what I believe to be the three primary weaknesses in Hardt and Negri’s argument. Firstly, their rejection of Marx’s so-called ‘law of value’. Secondly, their positing of an external as opposed to internal relation between labour and capital. And thirdly, the importance that Hardt and Negri place upon the increased levels of communication and communicability within productive processes today (broadly conceived) as a means of enabling the constitution of common struggle.

## **Part One: The Emergence of Immaterial Labour**

### ***Periodisation and Hegemony: A Note on Method***

Hardt and Negri (2001: 280-289) argue that it has become common to view the development of the modern economy in terms of three distinct moments, each of which

are said to have involved changes in both the nature and the quality of labour. The first phase saw the economy dominated by the extraction of raw materials and agriculture, the second by manufacturing and industry, and the third and current phase by the manipulation of information and the provision of services.

However, the means by which theorists have attempted to identify such paradigmatic shifts have varied. Castells and Aoyama (1994) are cited by Hardt and Negri as providing a *quantitative* explanation as to the emergence of an informational economy. Such analyses, Hardt and Negri argue, “cannot grasp either the *qualitative* transformation in the progression from one paradigm to another or the *hierarchy* among the economic sectors in the context of each paradigm” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 281).

For Hardt and Negri, the process of industrialisation, for example, cannot be explained as having simply involved a decrease in the proportion of the population employed in the primary relative to the secondary sector, or merely in terms of a shift from agriculture to industry as the primary sphere in which value was produced. Rather, the shift involved a qualitative transformation exerted by one form of production (industrial) over another (agricultural). “The farm progressively became a factory” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 284). The transformations ushered in by industrialisation were not, however, restricted to the realm of production. “More generally, society itself slowly became industrialized” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 284).

It is in this sense that Hardt and Negri (2004: 141) claim to remain true to Marx’s own methodology. Marx argued that relations of production always coexist within determinant hierarchies: “In all forms of society there is one specific form of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others” (Marx, 1973: 106-107).<sup>11</sup> Hardt and Negri argue that in the final decades of the twentieth century, industrial labour lost its hegemony and immaterial labour came to the fore, pulling, as industrial labour had done before it, other forms of labour and society itself into its ‘vortex’ (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 107).

### ***Immaterial Labour: Towards A Definition***

For Hardt and Negri, terms such as ‘service work’, ‘intellectual labour’ and ‘cognitive labour’ “all refer to aspects of immaterial labor, but none of them captures its generality” (2004: 108). Immaterial labour, they explain, is “that which creates immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship or an emotional response” (2004: 108). In other words, it is not the *labour* which is immaterial, “it involves our bodies and brains as all labor does”, but rather its *product* (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 109).

Immaterial labour can be conceived in two separate forms. Firstly, as that primarily involving either linguistic or intellectual activity, typically that involved in the production of images, ideas, symbols, codes, texts and so on (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 108). And secondly, as that which Hardt and Negri refer to as ‘affective labour’. In

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11 This quotation forms part of a short section, upon which Hardt and Negri draw extensively, entitled ‘The Method of Political Economy’ in the introduction to Marx’s *Grundrisse* (1973: 100-108).

other words, labour which manipulates or produces feelings of “ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 108).<sup>12</sup> Hardt and Negri (along with Lazzarato (1996: 140)) argue that a central feature of immaterial labour is the inherently co-operative, communicative and collaborative manner in which it is performed (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 147). In other words, co-operation, communication and collaboration are features which, unlike in previous forms of labour, are not imposed from ‘the outside’ by capital, but are “*completely immanent to the laboring activity itself*” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 294).<sup>13</sup> This is one of the primary grounds on which Hardt and Negri justify their proposition that an important paradigmatic shift has taken place. Both orthodox Marxist and classical political economy perspectives have traditionally viewed labour power as ‘variable capital’, “a force activated and made coherent only by capital” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 294). In other words, the capitalist is seen as having called the workers to the factory, directed them to co-operate in production and provided them with the means of doing so (see, for example, Marx, 1990: 439-454). Today, however, Hardt and Negri argue, *labour itself* increasingly “tends to produce the means of interaction, communication and cooperation for production directly” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 147).<sup>14</sup> It is in identifying this shift that Hardt and Negri are led to develop their concept of the ‘common’.

The common, for Hardt and Negri, is that upon which (immaterial) production is based, the manner in which it takes place, and its end result (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 148). “Our communication, collaboration and cooperation are not only based on the common, but they in turn produce the common in an expanding spiral relationship” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: xv).<sup>15</sup>

### ***The Hegemony of Immaterial Labour***

Hardt and Negri have attempted to explain the precise means by which immaterial labour exerts its hegemony. As we have already seen, their claim is a *qualitative* as opposed to a *quantitative* one. Agricultural labour remains, as it has done for centuries, dominant in quantitative terms. Yet despite the fact that immaterial labour “constitutes a minority of global labour, and it is concentrated in some of the dominant regions of the globe”, it nevertheless imposes a tendency upon other forms of labour, and upon society itself, forcing it to “informationalize, become intelligent, become communicative, become affective” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 109). I will attempt, in the following part of this paper, to summarise the means by which Hardt and Negri understand this process as taking place.

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12 For an elaboration of theories of affect, see Massumi (2002).

13 Virno makes a similar argument in his discussion of the means by which ‘artistic virtuosity’ is becoming “exemplary and pervasive” (2004: 58). See Virno (1996a: 189-212 and 2004: 52-71).

14 In this sense, we can see the way in which this aspect of Hardt and Negri’s argument constitutes a development of Negri’s earlier writings on the socialised worker (e.g.: Negri, 2005d: esp.57-58).

15 Terranova (2004: 73-78) describes something similar in her discussion of the work performed by ‘knowledge workers’ within the ‘digital economy’ which is said to have emerged in the late-1990s.

### ***The Peasantry, Agricultural Work and Immaterial Labour***

Hardt and Negri argue that a series of transformations have taken place within agricultural production in recent years. First of all, they claim that biochemical and biological developments, alongside innovations such as hydroponics and artificial lighting, represent a move away from large-scale (Fordist) agricultural production towards smaller-scale, more heavily specialised (post-Fordist) operations (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 112). Secondly, they claim that agriculture has become ‘informationalized’ (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 112), arguing that the production and control of agricultural information and knowledge, related in particular to the genetic make-up of plants, has become increasingly important to those involved in agricultural practices and an important site of struggle. And thirdly, they argue that the conditions of agricultural production are beginning to

become common to those of mining, industry, immaterial production, and other forms of labor in such a way that agriculture communicates with other forms of production and no longer poses a qualitatively different isolated form of production and life. (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 116).<sup>16</sup>

### ***Industrial Labour and Immateriality***

For Hardt and Negri, the shift from a ‘Fordist’ to a ‘Toyotist’ production process in many industries provides one of the clearest illustrations of the transformation of industrial production under the hegemony of immaterial labour. Their argument is based on the claim that the shift involved an inversion of the communication structure within the production process (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 289-290). Fordism, in its heyday at least, had been able to rely on the large-scale production of standardised commodities being met by an adequate level of demand (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 289-290). As such, there was little need for communication between the factory and the market. Toyotist production, on the other hand, represents a reversal of this situation. Communication between production and consumption is constant. Factories maintain ‘zero stock’ and depend on ‘just-in-time’ production systems, able to respond directly and immediately to the market<sup>17</sup> (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 290). “[E]ven in ‘heavy’ industries such as automobile manufacturing; a car is put into production only after the sales network orders it” (Lazzarato, 1996: 141).

### ***The Expansion (and Transformation) of the Service Sector***

Whilst Hardt and Negri (2001: 286) argue that the expansion of the service sector, and the blurring of the distinction between services and manufacturing, provides one potential indicator of the hegemony of immaterial labour, Lazzarato argues that a number of transformations have taken place within the service sector itself. He explains that we are not so much experiencing a growth of the service industry as we are “a development of the ‘relations of service.’” Services, he argues, as is the case with industry, are increasingly characterised by “the integration of the relationship between production and consumption, where in fact the consumer intervenes in an active way in

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16 For a problematisation of Hardt and Negri’s writing on the peasantry, cf. Dalla Costa, this issue.

17 Ohno (1988) offers a detailed explanation as to the means by which Toyota have attempted to achieve this ‘ideal type’ of production process.

the composition of the product.” In other words, the service industry today is increasingly characterised by forms of labour which involve a direct relationship with the customer, and where the customer is herself involved in the processes of conception and innovation (Lazzarato, 1996: 142).

### ***The Transformation of the Working Day, ‘Biopolitical Production’ and the Multitude***

Hardt and Negri argue that under the hegemony of immaterial labour, the conditions of work are tending to change. In particular, the distinction between work- and leisure-time is becoming blurred (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 111). While businesses at the ‘high end’ of the labour market are offering free exercise programmes and subsidised meals in order to keep their employees in the office as many hours of the day as possible, at the ‘low end’, workers are forced to juggle several jobs simply in order to survive (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 145). Work-time is expanding to fill “the entire time of life” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 111).

Furthermore, Hardt and Negri argue that a clear distinction can no longer be made between productive, non-productive and reproductive labour. Building on the concept of the ‘social factory’,<sup>18</sup> Hardt and Negri argue that production today has become ‘biopolitical’. In other words, *all of social life* has been rendered productive: “life is made to work for production and production is made to work for life” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 32).

‘Biopower’, of course, was a concept developed by Foucault to refer to a strategy of power, developed during the late-eighteenth century, which attempts to control and regulate the life of the population in general (Foucault, 1998: 135-159; 2003: 239-264 and 2006). Hardt and Negri use the term to describe the nature and operation of power within what they call ‘the society of control’ (2001: 22), the emergence of which they describe as similar to what Marx called “the passage from the formal subsumption to the real subsumption of labor under capital” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 25).<sup>19</sup> Their concept of ‘biopolitical production’, however, is really an inversion of Foucault’s concept, aimed towards describing the potential power of the productive forces within Empire. “Biopower stands above society, transcendent as a sovereign authority and imposes its order. Biopolitical production, in contrast, is immanent to society and creates social relationships and forms through collective labor” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 94-5). *In other words, biopolitical production refers to a situation in which mechanisms of cooperation, communication and collaboration have become contained within labour itself, presenting new opportunities for economic self-management and political and social self-organisation* (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 336). The hegemony of immaterial labour, therefore, is said to afford labour the ability to valorise itself. “In the expression

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18 The argument made by *Operaist* feminist theorists such as Dalla Costa and James (1975) as to the means by which activities outside the realm of waged labour, such as housework, are directly productive of capital was also picked up upon and developed in relation to this concept, and should be considered formative of these discussions.

19 Hardt and Negri describe the real subsumption of society as coinciding with the emergence of the world market in the 1970s (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 254-256). The concept of the ‘control society’ derives from Deleuze (1995).

of its own creative energies,” therefore, it “thus seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 294).

Amidst these processes, Hardt and Negri argue, new forms of subjectivity begin to emerge. Whereas previously the industrial working class had been assumed to be the actor solely or primarily responsible for production in capitalist societies, and hence occupied a position of political hegemony under which the struggles of others must be subsumed, this is no longer the case today. The ‘multitude’ is proposed by Hardt and Negri as a category capable of describing the emergent forms of subjectivity within the contemporary global political economy.

The concept of multitude has previously been used, albeit in very different ways, by both Hobbes (2004) and Spinoza (2005). Both posited the notion in opposition to that of ‘the people’ (a concept which tended “toward identity and homogeneity internally while posing itself different from and excluding what remains outside of it” (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 103)). It is with this opposition, however, that the similarity between Hobbes’ and Spinoza’s multitude ends.<sup>20</sup> For Hobbes, the multitude is that which exists in the state of nature; a condition of *bellum omnium contra omnes* (a war of all against all (Hobbes, 1968: 185)), which can only be overcome once the multitude is united into a people beneath a single, sovereign power: the Leviathan.<sup>21</sup> For Spinoza, however, the multitude remains a multiplicity which can *never* be reduced to a One, it is “an incommensurable multiplicity” (Negri, 2002b). It is, of course, to this multitude that Hardt and Negri refer.

Hardt and Negri describe the multitude as ‘legion’ (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 138-140); at once *one* and *many*, composed of a set of singularities (social subjects “whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different”) all of which are nevertheless said to produce within an increasingly common condition (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 99). Its boundaries are “indefinite and open” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 226), and are said to include all of those involved in social production/reproduction today. The multitude, furthermore, is said to be “the only social subject capable of realizing democracy, that is, the rule of everyone by everyone” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 100).

The multitude is explained as having “a strange, double temporality” (2004: 222). Whilst it constitutes the creative and productive force which called the current order into being, it nevertheless remains a political project as yet to be fully realised. In other words, the term is intended to give a name to that which is already said to be taking place, “grasping the existing social and political tendency”, whilst the act of naming itself is said to fulfil “a primary task of political theory”, providing “a powerful tool for further developing the political form” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 220).

All of this, however, is said to have serious implications for social theory. Hardt and Negri (2004: 140) argue that what distinguished Marx from other social theorists of his

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20 On the difference between ‘the multitude’ and ‘the people’, as well as the difference between Hobbes and Spinoza’s conceptions of the multitude, see Virno (1996a: 199-203 and 2004: 21-26).

21 See also Hobbes’ exposition of man in the state of nature (1968: 183-188 and 2004: 13-19).

day was his theory of historical materialism<sup>22</sup> which rejected the ‘one-size-fits-all’ idealisms that proposed trans-historical theoretical frameworks to explain all social realities. Instead, he argued “our mode of understanding must be fitted to the contemporary social world” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 140). Hardt and Negri argue that the paradigm of immaterial labour has created a new social reality, considerably different from Marx’s time. A new theoretical framework, they argue, is necessary in order to explain this reality.

### ***Value Beyond Measure***

Marx (1990: 173-174) followed a number of classical political economists such as Adam Smith (1998: 36-44) and David Ricardo (1996) in identifying labour as the source of all value and wealth in capitalist society. However, in recognising that one could not fully understand either the logic or the functioning of such a society by examining the labour of isolated individual workers, he was able to move beyond their analyses. As Hardt and Negri (2004: 144) recognise, he argued that capital should be understood as having created “a collective socially connected form of production in which the labor of each of us produces in collaboration with innumerable others.” In other words, Marx’s analysis, rather than focussing on an examination of ‘concrete’ instances of individual labour, employed the category of ‘abstract labour’, “a rational abstraction that is in fact more real and basic to understanding the production of capital than any concrete instances of individual labor” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 144).<sup>23</sup> The category allowed the productive work of a builder, cook or mechanic to be considered equivalent and measured in terms of homogenous units of time. It provided the means of understanding value production in capitalism. However, Hardt and Negri argue, the concept also allows us to recognise the difference between Marx’s time and our own (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 144-145).

The relation between value and (abstract) labour was posed by Marx in terms of “corresponding quantities: a certain quantity of time of abstract labor equals a quantity of value” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 145). This allowed Marx to eventually develop his notion of surplus value, and to articulate the means by which exploitation takes place within the labour process. Surplus value, for Marx, is the amount of value produced by a worker over and above that which she receives in the form of her wage. The greater the surplus extracted, the greater the rate of exploitation.

However, Hardt and Negri argue that, whilst labour remains the source of all value, *it is no longer measurable in terms of fixed quantities of time*. As we have seen, under the hegemony of immaterial labour, the distinction between productive and non-productive labour is far more unclear than it was in the time of Marx. As work time tends to expand to fill the entirety of life, and where what is produced is not simply the means of social life (the material objects which make modern forms of social life possible), but social life itself, production, according to Hardt and Negri, is rendered ‘biopolitical’ (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 146). Living and producing tend to become indistinguishable.

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22 Marx and Engels first set out their concept of historical materialism in the *German Ideology* (1998).

23 Marx’s concept of abstract labour is set out most clearly at (1990: 142).

The relation between labour and value, Hardt and Negri therefore claim, needs to be rethought (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 146).

This claim, I believe, is one of the most problematic in Hardt and Negri's analysis. We shall return to a more detailed interrogation of this aspect of their argument in Part Four of this paper.<sup>24</sup>

## **Part Two: The Predominance of the Network Form and the Emergence of Empire**

### ***Network Production, Network Societies***

Hardt and Negri (2004: 142) argue that networks – within businesses, communications systems, military organisations, social movements and so on – are becoming the 'common form' in an age of immaterial labour. They tend to define the way in which we understand the world and act within it. "Most important from our perspective, networks are the form of organization of the cooperative and communicative relationships *dictated* by the immaterial paradigm of production" (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 142, my emphasis).

Within the realm of immaterial production, Hardt and Negri argue, a centralisation of productive processes is no longer necessary (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 295). Innovations, such as the 'assembler network' developed by Toyota (Shiomi, 1995; Wada, 1995) mean that "the assembly line has been replaced by *the network* as the organizational model of production, transforming the forms of cooperation and communication within each productive site and among productive sites" (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 295). This tendency towards horizontal network enterprises is at its most clear within the processes of immaterial production, in which workers tend to be geographically dispersed, often even able to remain at home. Here cooperation and the communication of information and knowledge among workers occupy an even more central role (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 269).

However, Hardt and Negri's argument as to the becoming dominant of the network form is not limited to the direct realm of production. Indeed, in line with a number of other theorists (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1996 and 2001; Castells, 2000; McCarthy et al., 2004; Terranova, 2004), they argue this to be a phenomenon taking place throughout society (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 142). In their most recent collaborative work, and following a line of analysis characteristic of the workerist tradition which has always regarded resistance as ontologically prior to the techniques and strategies of power,<sup>25</sup> Hardt and Negri (2004: 51-91), present a genealogy of 'liberation struggles' and

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24 Cf. also, Henninger, this issue.

25 In this way there is a clear resonance between Italian workerism and aspects of French post-structuralism, in particular, the work of Deleuze and Guattari (e.g.: 2004) and (in Deleuze's opinion at least) Foucault (Deleuze, 2006: 74 and 120). On the means by which elements of post-structuralist and Marxist thought can complement one another, see also Read (2003).

counter-insurgency strategies, culminating in the network form of today. In doing so, they attempt to illustrate,

a correspondence between changing forms of resistance and the transformations of economic and social production: in each era, in other words, the model of resistance that proves to be most effective turns out to have the same form as the dominant models of economic and social production. (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 68)

### ***'Netwars' and the Emergence of Empire***

Modern revolutionary wars, Hardt and Negri explain, largely involved the coalescing of armed, largely peasant, guerrilla bands into 'people's armies' (2004: 69). A shift which they argue served as a motor for processes of modernisation, corresponding and contributing to the transition from peasantry to industrial working class (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 73). However, in the 1960s, the guerrilla model underwent a resurgence which Hardt and Negri argue corresponded in many ways to the shift which took place within the realm of production over the proceeding years. "The small mobile units and flexible structures of post-Fordist production correspond to a certain degree to the polycentric guerrilla model" (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 82).

The tendency described here, both within resistance movements and the realm of production, continued along a similar trajectory over the decades which followed. Whilst many of the movements to emerge towards the end of the twentieth century were characterised, to an extent at least, by 'old' organisational forms based around centralised and hierarchical command structures, many of them began to display 'network characteristics' (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 83). The Zapatista Army of National Liberation – described by Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1996: 73) as the "prototype of social netwar for the 21<sup>st</sup> century" – are only the most obvious example.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, Hardt and Negri argue, the 'globalization movements' which have emerged over the last decade provide "the clearest example to date of distributed network organizations" (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 86). These movements' tendency towards a network form of organisation has been widely documented (see, for example, Cleaver, 1998, 1999; Klein, 2001; Notes from Nowhere, 2003: 63-73, Nunes, 2005; Stammers and Eschle, 2005). Whilst largely being rooted in local struggles,<sup>27</sup> they have managed to develop substantial communication and coordination mechanisms. First of all, via a series of Zapatista '*Encuentros*', or encounters, in Mexico and Spain (Neill, 2001), later through the Peoples' Global Action network (de Marcellus, 2001), and most recently through the world and local social fora, the first of which took place in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2001 (Cassen, 2003: 48-53). The use which these movements have made of new information technologies to facilitate coordination and communication has also been widely documented (see, for example, Cleaver, 1999; Coyer, 2005).

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26 Two of the best introductions to, and attempts at a theoretical contextualisation of, the Zapatista movement are Holloway and Peláez (1998) and Mentinis (2006). See also Holloway (2006).

27 The local struggles within which the globalisation movements have been rooted has been documented by Notes from Nowhere (2003) and Klein (2002) amongst others.

The emergence of, and tendency towards, what Hardt and Negri (2004: 79) call ‘network struggles’ has necessitated a rethinking and restructuring of military strategy by a number of dominant states, the US in particular. As the Cold War drew to a close, a number of new challenges, posed by potential enemies considered far less ‘knowable’ (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 56) than a traditional, sovereign military opponent began to emerge. In response, a so-called ‘revolution in military affairs’ (RMA) took place which corresponded to the concurrent shifts taking place within the realm of production (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 41-48). Battle units were reduced in size; air, land and sea capabilities combined; and soldiers required to perform a range of tasks from combat, to search and rescue, to providing humanitarian aid (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 41). “The RMA depends not only on technological developments, such as computer and information systems, but also on new forms of labor – mobile, flexible, immaterial forms of labor” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 44). In other words, today’s soldier must not only be able to fight and kill, “but also be able to dictate for the conquered populations the cultural, legal, political, and security norms of life” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 44).

In effect, Hardt and Negri claim, “military theorists have thus... discovered the concept of biopower” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 53). They cite the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 US policy shift from ‘defense’ to ‘security’<sup>28</sup>, in which military strategy involves not just the *preservation* of the present order, but its *active and constant shaping* “through military and/or police activity” as one index of this (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 20). Hardt and Negri (2004: 54-55) argue that when confronted by an elusive and ephemeral network, traditional strategies are no longer effective. Instead, a positive strategy is required in which the social environment itself is created, maintained and controlled. Doing so, however, involves a restructuring of the military along the lines of, yet going beyond, the RMA described above, and furthermore, of the forms of sovereign power which the military represent: “not merely a revolution in military affairs but a transformation of the form of power itself” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 59). Hardt and Negri argue that “this process is part of the passage from imperialism, with its centralized and bounded form of power based in nation-states, to the network form of Empire” (2004: 59).

‘Empire’, then, is the name Hardt and Negri give to the global order said to be “materializing before our very eyes” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: xi). As colonial regimes were overthrown and the barriers to the capitalist world economy collapsed along with the Soviet Union, an ‘irreversible’ process of economic and cultural globalisation is said to have taken place (Hardt and Negri, 2001: xi). Emerging alongside the global markets and circuits of production, Empire provided “a new logic and structure of rule” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: xi). The increasing mobility of people, money, technology and goods corresponded to the decreasing ability of nation-states to regulate these flows. “Even the most dominant nation-states”, including the United States, Hardt and Negri argue, “should no longer be thought of as supreme and sovereign authorities, either outside or even within their own borders. *The decline in sovereignty of nation-states, however, does not mean that sovereignty as such has declined*” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: xi). Empire is said to constitute a new “global form of sovereignty”, composed of “a series of national and supranational organisms” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: xii).

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28 Bush (2002) is the primary text detailing this shift in policy.

Hardt and Negri (2001: 314-316 and Hardt, undated) borrow the concept of 'mixed constitution' from Polybius to explain the functioning of Empire today. Polybius (1979) used the term to describe (and celebrate) the Roman Empire as bringing together of the three 'good' forms of power: monarchy, aristocracy and democracy embodied by the Emperor, Senate and popular *comitia* respectively. Hardt and Negri argue that today's Empire is similarly composed of "various differing and often conflicting elements" which nevertheless function "within one coherent global constitution" (Hardt, undated). Today, Hardt explains, the supreme monarchical power is said to be variously represented by the military might of the United States, and a number of international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The aristocratic powers are understood as a number of transnational corporations and nation-states, whilst the democratic powers appear in the form, again, of nation-states, but also media organisations and NGOs (Hardt, undated and Hardt and Negri, 2001: 314-316).

Having attempted to set out the extent to which Hardt and Negri regard the shift from the paradigm of industrial to that of immaterial labour as having brought about, or at least coincided with, a number of important transformations throughout the global political economy, the remainder of this paper will dedicate itself to exploring and evaluating some of the criticisms that have been made of Hardt and Negri's work, and to presenting my own assessment of the contribution they have made to the way in which we can understand and interpret the world today.

### **Part Three: Towards and Evaluation of Hardt and Negri – Understanding the Concept of the 'Historical Tendency'**

Hardt and Negri have, I believe, correctly identified a number of important tendencies and trends within the global political economy. Whilst their argument at times seems abstract, appearing to be almost anti-empirical, there nevertheless exists a considerable amount of evidence to reinforce some of their core arguments. For example, research has recently been carried out suggesting, as Hardt and Negri have claimed, that the working day is indeed extending (see, for example, Henwood, 2003: 39-41); that working conditions in all industries, within the dominant economies at least, are becoming increasingly flexible and insecure (see, for example, Gray, 1995 and Kernow and Sullivan, 2004); that the network form is becoming dominant today (see, for example, Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001; Castells, 2000; Terranova, 2004); and that the service sector is expanding (Castells and Aoyama, 1994; 2002). Other claims, such as the increased blurring of the distinction between work and leisure, appear almost self-evident. One need only take a look, for example, at the recruitment pages on websites of major employers to see that companies are increasingly providing their employees with leisure facilities, increasing the number of hours that they spend at their place of

employment and contributing to the development of personal relationships between staff members.<sup>29</sup>

However, despite, in my opinion, having identified and drawn attention to a number of important trends, Hardt and Negri's work has drawn heavy criticism and sparked extensive debate within and beyond the social sciences. It is my belief, however, that many of those criticisms have, at least in part, been based on a failure to fully comprehend the *tendential* nature of their argument. For instance, Harman (2003), Henwood (2003: 184-185) and Thompson (2005: 84-85) have all gone to lengths in order to demonstrate that the industrial working class is not decreasing in size, and that those whom Hardt and Negri would describe as 'immaterial labourers' constitute a relatively small proportion of the global workforce. However, as we have already seen, this is a line of argument with which Hardt and Negri would certainly not disagree. Their argument, they repeatedly emphasise, is *qualitative* as opposed to *quantitative*. "Numbers are important," they explain, "but the key is to grasp the direction of the present, to read which seeds will grow and which wither" (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 141). In other words, their argument that immaterial labour is tending to inform and influence other forms of production – all of which, of course, remain singular but tend towards an increasing number of elements in common – is in no way contradicted by the claim that there has been *no overall decline* in the number of people involved in industrial or, for that matter, agricultural production.

More controversial than their argument as to the becoming hegemonic of immaterial labour, however, has been Hardt and Negri's claim as to the structural transformations said to have taken place alongside this process, and in particular the move from the era of imperialism to Empire.

### ***From Imperialism to Empire?***

The claim made by Hardt and Negri that "Imperialism is over" (2001: xiv) has proven to be one of their most controversial. A huge number of articles (for example, Barkawi and Laffey, 2002; Bull, 2003; Callinicos, 2001, 2002; Petras, 2001) and at least one book (Boron, 2005) have dedicated themselves, amongst other things, to illustrating the perceived weaknesses of the 'end of imperialism' thesis.<sup>30</sup>

The publication of *Empire*, was initially considered timely (Adams, 2001). The book had been written between the end of the 1991 Persian Gulf War and the outbreak of war in Kosovo (Hardt and Negri, 2001: xvii). This was a period in which the North American Free Trade Agreement had come into effect, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) had been formalised as an institution, and processes of liberalisation seemed to be unstoppable. 'Globalisation' was becoming a buzz-word both within the academy and popular culture.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, *Empire's* publication a couple of months after the

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29 For example, American Express [<http://www10.americanexpress.com/sif/cda/page/0,1641,13841,00.asp>] or Microsoft [<http://members.microsoft.com/careers/mslife/benefits/plan.msp>].

30 Brewer (1990) offers a useful critical survey of various Marxian theories of imperialism.

31 Scholte (2000: 43-44) charts the rise of notions of 'globalisation' and the spread of the term across dozens of languages since the 1980s.

'Battle of Seattle' seemed, with the concept of 'multitude', to provide a framework within which co-operation between groups previously considered to have conflicting interests (trade unionists and environmentalists; anarchists and communists; nuns and queer activists) could be understood.<sup>32</sup>

However, almost as soon as *Empire* was off the presses, strong counter-tendencies appeared to be emerging. The collapse of the Cancun WTO Ministerial in September 2003, following the demand by a group of countries from the global south (the G21) that the north open its own borders in return for access to their markets (Wallerstein, 2003); the failure of the Free Trade of the Americas Agreement (FTAA) talks in Miami later that year, followed by their final collapse in Mar del Plata, Argentina in November 2005,<sup>33</sup> and, of course, the US-led military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, considered by some as little more than "an old-fashioned European-style colonial occupation" (Ali, 2003: 9), provide just a few examples.

Once again, many of the criticisms made of Hardt and Negri's claim overlook the tendential nature of their argument. But it must be said that, although Hardt and Negri certainly went to some lengths in *Empire* to emphasise "real and important continuities" (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 9) with the past, this aspect of their argument became, at times, obscured by their own rhetoric. Even the authors themselves, in their more recent works (see, for example, Hardt, 2006; Negri, 2002a), appear to concede that their previous proclamations as to the end of imperialism were, perhaps, a little over-zealous.

Perhaps in light of the series of historical events which followed *Empire*'s publication, some of which are outlined above; or perhaps out of frustration at the way in which their work has been consistently misinterpreted, in recent works Hardt and Negri are far more explicit about their deployment of 'the historical tendency' as an analytic and descriptive tool (see, in particular, Hardt and Negri, 2004: 141-144).

As we have already seen, Hardt and Negri's analysis of counterinsurgency led to their arguing that the US military and, more generally, US power itself, "must become a network, shed its national character, and become an imperial military machine" (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 59). In other words, *military necessity itself* dictates that "[t]he network form of power is the only one today able to create and maintain order" (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 59). However, this is not to deny, as critics such as Callinicos (2002) and Wood (2003: 71) appear to believe has been argued, that single powers, such as the United States, may attempt to "circumvent [the] necessity of the network form" (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 61). Indeed, they do. "[B]ut what it throws out the door always sneaks back in the window. For a centralized power, trying to push back a network is like trying to beat back a rising flood with a stick" (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 61). The current war in Iraq is cited as one example of this.

In a recent paper, Hardt (2006) argues that the architects of the Iraq war "have fooled themselves into believing that the United States can repeat the glory of the great

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32 For accounts from Seattle, see St. Claire (2004) or Notes from Nowhere (2003: 204-245).

33 Following the breakdown of negotiations, here, the Venezuelan President, Hugo Chavez pronounced the FTAA "dead" (Reuters, 2005).

imperialists.” Likewise, he explains, many of the war’s opponents have been quick to believe them, “returning to the old anti-imperialist discourses and concepts”<sup>34</sup> (Hardt, 2006). However, “all these comparisons” with previous eras of imperialism, he argues, “are really just ill fitting clothes that disguise what is going on underneath” (Hardt, 2006). Returning to the notion of the mixed constitution of today’s Empire, he argues that the current war can, perhaps, better be understood in terms of a “coup d’Etat within the global system.” In other words, “a usurpation of power within the ruling order by the unilateral, monarchical element [represented by the United States] and the corresponding subordination of the multilateral, aristocratic forces [represented by other dominant nation-states, major corporations, supranational organisations and so on]” (Hardt, 2006). Whilst Hardt recognises that the current US administration believes that it can successfully rule the world, “with merely the aid of passive vassals”, he argues that they are very much mistaken. He cites the unilateralist adventures in Iraq as having proven ‘untenable’, with occupation having led to instability and civil war. “No one can doubt at this point that the current US masquerade as an imperialist power, capable of dictating global order unilaterally, will eventually collapse under the weight of its own failures” (Hardt, 2006).

And indeed, this is precisely what the monarchical powers of Empire – or at least some of the most senior advisors – appear to be learning. In early 2006, Francis Fukuyama, a former member of the Project for the New American Century and once-leading neo-conservative political economist, distanced himself from the tradition, on the basis of the crisis in Iraq. Despite having been a co-signatory of a 1998 letter to US President Bill Clinton,<sup>35</sup> as well as a similar letter to US President George W Bush following September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001,<sup>36</sup> both of which called for the overthrow of the Hussein regime, Fukuyama criticises the manner in which the war in Iraq has been carried out. Whilst continuing to argue for US world leadership, he argues for a serious re-thinking of the means by which foreign policy is carried out, arguing, “The solution is to promote a ‘multi-multilateral world’ of overlapping and occasionally competing international institutions organised on regional or functional lines” (Fukuyama, 2006a; see also 2006b). The recently published Iraq Study Group Report (Baker III et al., 2006) has similarly argued that the reimposition of ‘order’ in Iraq can only be ensured through the active deployment of the various elements of Empire.

In this sense, then, whilst imperialist *ambition* may be far from over, imperialism, as an effective mechanism of rule, is indeed in its final death throes. Ultimately, the network form of power will be imposed, “*strictly from the perspective of effectiveness of rule*” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 62). In other words, the imposition and maintenance of (capitalist) order in Iraq and beyond is only likely to be achieved, if at all, through constant collaboration between what Hardt and Negri would call the ‘monarchical’ supreme power of the United States and various ‘aristocratic’ powers, such as the forces

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34 For an example of anti-imperialist discourse deployed by opponents of the current war in Iraq, see Ali (2003) or Cockburn and St. Clair (2004).

35 The letter, dated January 26<sup>th</sup> 1998, is available online here: [<http://www.newamericancentury.org/iraqclintonletter.htm>].

36 The letter, dated September 20<sup>th</sup> 2001, is available online here: [<http://www.newamericancentury.org/Bushletter.htm>].

of ‘old’ and ‘new’ Europe, the UN, and numerous NGOs, aid agencies and humanitarian bodies.

## **Part Four: The Limits of Hardt and Negri’s Analysis**

As I have already explained, I believe Hardt and Negri’s central argument, that a series of transformations have taken place, or are in the process of taking place, within the realm of production, and that these transformations correspond to a large extent to changes taking place throughout society and even within the structures of international power itself, to be broadly correct. That a networked form of power – in which nation-states and a range of non-state actors, including major corporations, international organisations, NGOs and others, constitute a form of global governance – has emerged alongside post-Fordist forms of production seems almost undeniable. Indeed, Reid (2005) has gone some way towards demonstrating the role which international organisations such as the UN, humanitarian agencies and global civil society have played in creating the necessary preconditions for the current war in Iraq, perhaps the most oft cited example of the supposed resurgence of, or regression to, imperialist projects in which the power of the nation-state is considered primary.<sup>37</sup>

However, I believe that there nevertheless exist a number of real and important weaknesses in Hardt and Negri’s analysis. The first of which, I believe, is their claim as to the immeasurability of value in today’s global political economy. The second – which in some ways can be understood as derivative from (at least elements of) the workerist tradition more generally – is the way in which the relation between labour and capital (or the multitude and Empire) is conceived. And the third and final key weakness, I will argue, is the grounds upon which Hardt and Negri attempt to substantiate their claim as to the possibilities for liberation opened up in the age of Empire, namely: the increasingly communicative, collaborative and cooperative manner in which production is understood as taking place today. I will attempt to set out each of these lines of critique in turn.

### ***The Value of Value Discourse***

I believe Hardt and Negri’s claim as to value being beyond measure, under the hegemony of immaterial labour, to be flawed on a number of grounds. First and foremost, it appears bizarrely at odds with their own observation elsewhere that the emergence of new forms of (immaterial) private property, such as intellectual property, has necessitated the development of new legal structures (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 187). Surely the fact that knowledge, for example, has been successfully transformed into a saleable commodity and acquired an exchange value indicates nothing other than the continued presence of value as a form of measure. Furthermore, their claim that the amount of labour embodied within immaterial commodities is immeasurable on the basis of the labour involved in its production not being traceable to an individual labourer, but rather taking place through a process of ‘biopolitical’ collaboration and

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37 See also, Reid (2006).

cooperation (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 187), is truly surprising. As they themselves explain elsewhere (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 144-145), Marx's concept of value, unlike that of the classical political economists, is based on the concept of 'abstract' as opposed to 'concrete' labour. In other words, Marx's concept of value *never* required being able to identify the work performed by individual waged labourers. As Marx himself explained, "The labour objectified in value is labour of an average social quality, it is an expression of average labour-power" (1990: 440).

In an excellent recent article, George Caffentzis (2005) briefly outlines the positive contribution which value discourse made to the anti-capitalist movement of Marx's day. Firstly, he explains that it provided an "apparently precise and measurable definition of exploitation in capitalist society" (Caffentzis, 2005: 94). This was especially useful, he argues, since within the capitalist mode of production exploitation is formally 'hidden' (Caffentzis, 2005: 94).<sup>38</sup> Whereas under feudalism it was apparent to a serf when they were working on their own land and when on their lord's land, for capitalism's waged-labourer, however, the moment when she has completed the necessary labour-time to generate the value equivalent to that which she receives in the form of her wage, and hence begins producing a surplus, remains obscured. Secondly, value discourse provided "a narrative... that workers can use in an antagonistic way to describe themselves as fundamental actors in the drama of history and the capitalists and landlords as parasitic upon their labor, anxiety and suffering" (Caffentzis, 2005: 94). And thirdly, allowing labour to recognise itself as the creative and productive force within capitalism enabled it to understand its own potential to create a world beyond it (Caffentzis, 2005: 94).

Contra Hardt and Negri, Caffentzis, correctly I believe, argues that there is no particular reason why value discourse in general, and the law of value<sup>39</sup> in particular, should not continue to fulfil a similar function today. Indeed, he observes that the law of value has, in fact, "been most tyrannical in the current neoliberal period!" (2005: 106). "Any reading of the financial press and the economic policy makers' position statements" he argues,

would give anyone the impression that the Law of Value, as usually understood, is a truism. Surely what is the prescription for any economic problem but more discipline of labor, more labor flexibility and productivity, a reduction of costs, and so on? ...Of course, if you want your products to compete on the world market you need to reduce the socially necessary labor time required to produce them, by any means necessary. (Caffentzis, 2005: 106-107).

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38 The specificity of exploitation within the capitalist mode of production is set out brilliantly by Wood (1995).

39 Caffentzis (2005: 90) argues that Marx himself rarely used the phrase 'law of value'. As a result, its meaning and implication have been variously interpreted. Caffentzis, following Leontyev, adopts the narrowest definition of the law: "the value of a commodity is determined by the socially necessary labor-time required for its production" (Caffentzis, 2005: 94).

### ***The Capital-Labour Relation in Hardt and Negri***

The second limit to Hardt and Negri's work is in some ways traceable to one of the workerist tradition's primary strengths; namely, its attempt to render labour, its struggles and agency visible.

To be absolutely clear: such efforts are certainly always to be commended. Indeed, a recent empirical study carried out by Silver (2003) has illustrated the very real extent to which workers' struggles have contributed to processes of globalisation since 1870, with capital constantly relocating and developing new strategies to escape and ultimately defeat workplace militancy.

However, a criticism could certainly be directed towards a number of *operaisti* – and Hardt and Negri in particular – as to having read Tronti's 1964 call to “turn the problem on its head”, reverse the polarity and recognise “the class struggle of the working class” as *the* motor of capitalist development, far more literally than even he meant it. In doing so, they reproduce – albeit in reverse – the weakness of the orthodox approach. That is, emphasising one side of the capital relation, and obscuring the other in the process. The result is that the role that victories by capital over labour, such as the defeat of the British miners' strike in the 1980s, have played in shaping the current world order are overlooked (Callinicos, 2001; Thompson, 2005: 88-89).<sup>40</sup>

In this sense, Holloway's critique of elements of the workerist tradition is pertinent. He argues that the “movement of capitalist rule” can indeed be understood as “driven by the force of working class struggle”, however, not in the way that Hardt, Negri and others have understood it (Holloway, 2002: 165). Whereas they have interpreted the relation between labour and capital as an ‘external’ one, with the history of capitalist development being one of reaction to the struggles of the working class, Holloway argues the relation to be ‘internal’ (2002: 165). In other words, “capital is a function of the working class for the simple reason that capital is nothing other than the *product* of the working class and therefore depends, from one minute to another, upon the working class for its reproduction” (Holloway, 2002: 165). Such an understanding, as Holloway points out, allows us to identify the extent to which labour is contained within capital (and hence capital's power over labour), but also the extent to which labour exists as an internal contradiction within capital (and hence labour's power over capital) (Holloway, 2002: 174).<sup>41</sup> Understanding both these aspects of the capital/labour relation is, I believe, key to comprehending both processes that have led to developments within the global political economy, and the potential for its transformation.

### ***A Question of Communication***

Hardt and Negri's argument as to the potential for liberation within what they call Empire is, as we have seen, based to a large extent upon their claim that processes of

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40 Lotringer (2004: 11) has also criticised Hardt and Negri's opposition to a “hybrid thesis” that would recognise the creativity and power of both labour and capital.

41 Ironically, in a 1964 article, published one year after *Lenin in England* which originally proposed the Copernican inversion that has characterised much of the workerist tradition, Tronti himself went to great lengths to illustrate precisely this ‘internal’ relation.

communication, coordination and collaboration are becoming ‘immanent’ to the labouring process itself, creating the conditions for “a spontaneous and elementary” form of communism (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 294). There are a number of problems with this argument.<sup>42</sup>

The first is related to their claim that capital today is increasingly parasitic, and hence more obviously disposable (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 294 and 2004: 147). Whereas in the past, capital was understood as functioning “like an orchestra conductor or a field general, deploying and coordinating productive forces in a common effort” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 462), today labour, and immaterial labour in particular, as we have seen, is understood as being capable of self-valorisation (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 294). However, whilst a minority of ‘privileged’ intellectual, artistic or creative workers may well be both capable of, and willing to, valorise their own labour; this is unlikely to be the case in most other sectors. How many workers in a Toyotist factory, temporary labourers entering data into a spreadsheet, or affective fast-food workers would, I wonder, maintain the productivity levels currently expected of them if the individual personifications of capital responsible for overseeing, ordering and directing their daily work were to disappear over night?<sup>43</sup>

Secondly, Hardt and Negri’s claim as to the changes taking place within the realm of industrial production under the hegemony of immaterial labour is based, to a large extent, on the presumption that industrial production is increasingly characterised by a Toyotist, as opposed to a Fordist, production process. However, there now exists a considerable body of literature which indicates that whilst the so-called ‘Japanese model of production’, developed at Toyota and elsewhere, did indeed proliferate during the 1970s and 1980s, its success was relatively short lived and it has now become regarded as an outdated management strategy (Bernard, 2000; Gambino, 1996; Moodey, 1997: 110-113; Silver, 2003: 69). Furthermore, whilst Hardt and Negri are certainly correct to identify the important role that communication plays in Toyotism, both in terms of communication between the market and the factory and within and between production plants, the means by which they understand these particular forms of communication as creating the necessary conditions for workers to develop a sense of collective identity, solidarity and, ultimately, agency remains an open question.

Hardt and Negri’s ability to identify important tendencies and to generalise from them is, I believe, one of the greatest strengths of their work. However, there are a number of dangers involved in such an approach. The flattening out, or obscuring, of important differences, in this case between different forms of communication, is one such danger. Hardt and Negri correctly identified the inability of workers and peasants to effectively communicate and coordinate during previous waves of struggle as having severely limited their success (see, for example, Hardt and Negri, 2004: 122-124). However,

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42 This issue overlaps, of course, in many ways with that mentioned above, namely: the tendency to posit the relation between capital and labour as an external one.

43 De Angelis and Harvie (2006) and Dowling (2006) illustrate the means by which both the ‘high’ and ‘low’ ends of immaterial and affective forms of labour (higher education teaching and waitressing respectively) are both measured and disciplined. In both instances, capital’s role appears far more than simply ‘parasitic’.

their claim that communication and flows of information play an increasingly central role in all forms of production today appears to have led them to conclude that *communication amongst workers* (their ability to share their experiences, grievances and to coordinate their struggles) no longer constitutes a problem. The qualitative nature of the communication involved in most productive processes, however, remains completely obscured within their analysis. It is hard to conceive how communication between market, factory and supply chain in the Toyotist just-in-time (JIT) system, for example, constitutes any greater opportunity for the development of effective labour struggles than the Fordist assembly line. Indeed, a recently published study of workplace militancy in automobile factories worldwide found that in the original JIT system implemented at Toyota, levels of worker militancy were extremely low, a fact which the study's author attributed to the core workforce being offered employment security in return for their cooperation (Silver, 2003: 66-70). When the JIT system was implemented elsewhere, however, without the corresponding employment guarantees, workplaces were characterised by higher rates of employee turnover and more frequent industrial actions; although even within these plants, "the dynamic of labour-capital conflict has remained largely the same as in the traditional Fordist model" (Silver, 2003: 68).

In other words, I would argue that the *qualitative* as opposed to the *quantitative* nature of the communication involved in productive processes is of far more relevance to determining the likelihood of an emancipatory anti-capitalist workers' movement or struggle developing, a distinction which Hardt and Negri appear to largely overlook.

### **Concluding Remarks**

I believe that Hardt and Negri's concept of immaterial labour, and the narrative they offer as to the means by which it exerts its hegemony, equips us with a theoretical framework within which we can make sense of a number of significant processes currently taking place within the global political economy. Similarly, the concept of Empire describes, I believe, an important tendency in the functioning of power on a global level today.

Of course, none of this is in any way to deny the existence of real and important counter-tendencies, of which the apparent resurgence of imperialist ambition – expressed most clearly in terms of the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> military adventurism of the United States – is merely one example amongst many. As Hardt and Negri have convincingly argued, however, the task of social theory is "to grasp the direction of the present, to read which seeds will grow and which wither" (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 141).

The possibilities for liberation opened up by the current processes of transformation, however, are somewhat over-stated in Hardt and Negri's work. As Lotringer explains: "That an alternative to the contemporary imperial order is 'necessary'... doesn't make its existence any more tangible" (2004: 15).

As we have already seen, Hardt and Negri's concept of multitude has a double temporality. It describes both an existing tendency and a political project as yet to be realised. Whilst it is indeed the case that, under the hegemony of immaterial labour, all of us produce within an increasingly common condition; there appears to be little or no

reason to believe that it is one in which the potential for communism – no matter how ‘spontaneous’ or ‘elementary’ in form – is any greater than in previous eras. Whilst effective communication, coordination and collaboration amongst all of those involved in productive and reproductive practices today may well hold the key to establishing the forms of democracy to which Hardt and Negri allude, that these features have already become immanent to labouring practices today appears as nothing more than a tragically flawed proposition.

This having been said, traces of something resembling the multitude, albeit in a very embryonic form, can indeed be identified within a number of social movements today. The counter-globalisation movements described above provide perhaps the most obvious example of this. At protests such as those surrounding the WTO Ministerial in Seattle in 1999, to cite only the most well known example, we have seen groups previously considered contradictory working together, not within a single, unified or unifying organisation, but relating to one another through a networked structure. In this sense, Hardt and Negri’s *naming* of this tendency, which as they have themselves explained, in itself provides “a powerful tool for further developing the emerging political form” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 220), may have made somewhat of a contribution to the second aspect of the multitude’s double temporality – i.e. as a political project as yet to be fully realised.

The project of the multitude’s self-constitution, then, is something which cannot be taken for granted. There is no *telos*; and there are no (longer any) certainties. For those of us interested in its further development, however, there would seem to be two overlapping fields in which we need to intensify our activity. The first is that of inquiry; and the second is that of practice/intervention.

In many ways, openly political ‘militant research’, ‘workers’ inquiry’<sup>44</sup> and (in particular) ‘co-research’<sup>45</sup> have always been part of the *operaist* project, contrasting starkly to the supposedly ‘objective’ perspective often claimed within the social sciences.<sup>46</sup> Today, however, with the spilling of production out of the factory and into society at large and the tendential emergence of Empire, a particular kind of inquiry is called for. The proposal made elsewhere in this issue of *ephemera* by Conti et al. provides an excellent point of departure. It proposes a project of co-research which looks beyond the traditional workplace and at the whole of metropolitan social life; which examines the labour market and the realms and environments of production; which looks at the places of conflict and at the experience of mobility; and finally, which seeks to determine the locations and forms of governance and control. It is precisely such co-research which could guide and inform our political practice and

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44 One recent, interesting, project of inquiry was engaged with over three years by the Ruhrpott (Germany) based group Kolinko, examining the (potential) role of call centre workers within the new class composition (Kolinko, 2001).

45 For a helpful definition of ‘co-research’, and its methodological and political differences to ‘workers’ inquiry’, see Conti et al., this issue.

46 Which is, of course, not to say that all research carried out from ‘within the academy’ is either ‘non-political’ or claims objectivity. The extremely interesting ethnographic research carried out by Ngai (2005) on the realities of internal migrant women working in China’s factories is but one example of important and useful research to have recently come out of the social sciences.

enable us to determine the level and realm most appropriate (that is, effective) for social intervention.

Today, all political practice needs to be directed towards bringing about a class recomposition; that is, the constitution of the multitude – a productive power capable of confronting and, ultimately, breaking with neo-liberal, post-Fordist social relations. That precisely *how* this could be done remains somewhat abstract in Hardt and Negri's work represents no great weakness on their part.

Whilst Marx's *Capital* (and his other great works), provided generations of workers with a powerful weapon for both understanding their own exploitation and recognising themselves as the source of social wealth and productivity; it was not from these pages that solutions as to how the world could be remade were sought. Rather, 'the question of organisation' was addressed by the Paris Commune and the workers' councils and soviets in Germany, Russia and elsewhere. In the same way, today, it will not be *Empire* or *Multitude*, or a journal such as this that the answer to Lenin's old question will be found. What, precisely, is to be done? is being looked for elsewhere. And indeed, some tentative solutions are already being found. They lie in the mobilisations against international summits which have erupted around the world everywhere from Seattle to Prague and Genoa to Hong Kong; in Paris's rebellious *banlieu*; in the *piquetero* organisations set up after Argentina's financial crisis in 2001; and in the social uprising taking place in Oaxaca, Mexico at the time of this writing.

Careful, well-directed projects of co-research, which aim to uncover both the common and the singular; in constant relation with experiments in social and political intervention are the only ways in which we will be able, if at all, to contribute to the self-constitution of the multitude. It is with this project which we should busy ourselves.

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