

Whiteness in quantified precarity. Similarly, where the book points to the ways in which the levers of biopower, operating at a distance, have crept into the intimacies of our autonomic selves, the idea that data generated by self-tracking enable a learning about ourselves warrants further thought regarding the possibilities for *eudaimonia* in the era of agility: let us consider how we might know and value ourselves outside of, and resisting, agile's intensification.

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Tous Ensemble

Assembly. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. xiii + 346 pp. £25 (hbk). ISBN: 9780190677961

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have bestowed on us an unexpected fourth instalment of their *Empire* trilogy. Following from *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004), *Commonwealth* (2009), and the short *Declaration* (2012), here comes *Assembly*.

Published by Oxford University Press, this is the first in the publisher's series on heretical thought, which according to series editor Ruth O'Brien will comprise works that 'embody seismic or significant breaks in sclerotic contemporary political thought'. In intent *Assembly* lives up to this promise.

Nearly 20 years ago, diving into a consolidating current of postmodern Marxism, the authors set to work on *Empire*. From postmodern Marxism, readers could expect an overflowing river of undecidability collecting tributaries of fragmentation, liquidity, proliferating demands of conflicting identities and dispersed cultures of repressed resistance. Since then, a schizoid contemporary capitalism has built dysfunction into its working *rationalité* and accommodated postmodern theory as a working partner in crime. Yet Hardt and Negri keep presenting us with as grand a narrative as one can fathom.

True to the authors' style, at the darkest of times and against an encircling current of melancholia, *Assembly* presents readers with none other than an exhortation. What contemporary theory bemoans as fragmentation is here celebrated as a force in need of channelling. Confident in the ability of struggles around the globe to communicate with one another, Hardt and Negri exhort them all against the present order. In *Assembly*, political expediency takes precedence over all demands of politics and ethics of recognition.

In the face of this exhortation, preceding volumes retrospectively appear as a long reconnaissance mission that paved the way for this moment. Known tropes are updated, but the thesis and diagnosis of the contemporary global order goes largely unrevised, a bird's eye view of global capitalism purposed to detect vulnerabilities to hone in on.

The alleged aim of the book is 'to demonstrate the effectiveness of and existing conditions to support non-sovereign political institutions and democratic organisation' (p. 45). But the ambition is taken over by this hortatory urge. Even in its diagnostic moments, it intervenes in contemporary Marxist debates without polemic, with a sense of common purpose. Not indulging in family feuds, the voice is resolutely concentrated on the common problem. No other book in the series speaks so directly to social movements: every 'you', a paraenesis to activists around the globe.

Counter-intuitive and anti-conformist, the authors provoke their main readership first, with an opening on 'The Leadership Problem'. They invert a common-sense relation between strategy and tactic, urging the movement to position leaders in a tactical rather than strategic role, against the old left logic of the centaur – a vanguard human head on a beastly body of followers. The authors mention known political martyrs, from Luxemburg to Gramsci, Mandela and Kayapakkaya, but one needs not go so far, as in everyday work organisations 'maladaptive responses' to management are routinely punished with public displays of cruelty and humiliation inflicted on perceived troublemakers. The authors advocate tactical (or dispensable) leadership to ensure that cutting off one head, rather than killing the body, simply causes many more heads to surface as in a game of whack-a-mole, an image well captured by the phenomenon of mirroring websites à la Pirate Bay, close to the practice described in counter-insurgency manuals as 'leaderless resistance'. Two of the greatest causes for concern of global governors, Islamic State and Anonymous, already operate in this manner: IS militant cells count a minimum of four people at any one time functioning as second in command, and Anonymous does not even have an identity, let alone identifiable leaders.¹

However, this exhortation appears as an outright provocation to readers of Hardt and Negri, many of whom are movement leaders who have long lamented the so-called 'tyranny of structurelessness'.² Since the rise in popularity of the tactics of groups such as the Zapatistas and the White Overalls in the 1990s, the publicness, visibility and recognisability of leadership have been objects of fierce debate for the global justice or alter-globalisation movements, even more so as the battleground of the "no logo generation" always occupied spectacular politics, reputation management and symbolic capital. Critics object that Hardt and Negri's approach advocates a defensive mindset: the use of anonymity and the refusal to identify leaders betray a militaristic and exclusively antagonistic attitude to politics. Critics are uncomfortable with this exhortation also because it appears to dismiss the leaders' know-how. Assemblies need facilitators and professional activists.³ Ultimately, this was always a political question disguised as a procedural one. In their inversion of functions, Hardt and Negri urge social movements to create organisational structures that are commensurate to their opponents.

What does "from below" mean? opens Part II, on social production, which, in dialogue with its critics, updates aspects of the thesis presented in previous volumes. 'If you begin with power all you ever see is power'. Citing Machiavelli as a standpoint theorist *avant la lettre*, Hardt and Negri claim that only from the bottom of the mountain is the summit visible. At the bottom lies the common. Since the Nobel Prize recognition of Elinor Ostrom's contribution to economics in 2009 - the year Hardt and Negri published *Commonwealth* – the question of the governance of the common has been addressed in more mainstream debates. In Hardt and Negri's version, the common does not merely designate open access to common resources or goods, but also participation in democratic decision-making on their governance. It also denominates a particular mode of production based on the extractivism of the social factory.⁴ This ongoing emphasis on social processes and decision-making structures instead of legal property rights steers the mainstream debate away from

calls for ‘making the public public again’, or reversing the process of privatisation by returning public goods under state ownership. Changes in ownership structures by themselves do not address inequalities: in the authors’ view, radical democracy remains the best safeguard against injustice and usurpation. As reported in this journal, the history of the cooperative movement and the emergence and spread of open organisation structures demonstrates that shared ownership alone is insufficient in determining their longevity and effectiveness; decision-making structures that reflect the principles of cooperation and openness are as essential. For Hardt and Negri, the social character of production as it presents itself to us now is a process in need of the right sort of politicisation. ‘Despite the fact that it is produced socially, fixed capital [... the general intellect ...] becomes a weapon that can be used anti-socially’ (pp. 110–111). What *Empire* named immaterial labour becomes downgraded to ‘digital Taylorism’, menial ‘clickwork’, the tedium of mindless routine work requiring high levels of education.

Those who agree that history should not be solely written by the winners will enjoy Part III on financial command and neoliberal governance, a tale of how, given its weak hand at the negotiating table, the only way for capital to increase exploitation was by progressively de-democratising the state. The picture drawn in broad brush is one of public unrest creating growing public debt, leading to privatisations and the financialisation of the economy, widening a gap between capital and labour, removing the risky layer of democratic states as mediating agent, and granting financial mechanisms the sovereignty to directly rule over populations. Contrary to common views of finance as largely an economic process concerning transfers of money, the authors present it as the centre of gravity of what they had previously described as the ‘extraction of the common’.

For those expecting a programme, Part IV on the new prince of the multitude provides a take on the question of what is to be done. The three options presented, though not mutually exclusive, are slightly at odds: exodus, or the creation of ‘prefigurative’ practices and utopian communities; antagonistic reformism, being within and against institutions, in a war of position; and the complete overthrowing of existing institutions to create new ones, a war of manoeuvre and full-blown insurgency. Ultimately, in Hardt and Negri’s view, the subversion of neoliberal subjectivity requires ‘being together’, the exhortation in the title. Assembly is a call to unite, strength in numbers, seen elsewhere as ‘We are the 99%’, ‘For the many, not the few’, ‘Yes We Can’, and so on and so forth. ‘Being together’ gives legitimacy to constituent projects, ‘being together’ is the ontological condition of the multitude.

It might lack the philosophical density of previous volumes, but *Assembly* is not short of political intensity. But there is a strained gesture in this exhortation. In previous volumes, the figure of a multitude accounted for the deep anthropological transformations following the defeat of the old left. In *Assembly*, it becomes difficult to discern a difference between multitudinal and collectivist approaches to social ontology, and the specificity of the multitude does not translate into a discrete form of organisation. Strained is also the approach to anti-social social movements: right-wing movements are a ‘dark mirror’, overestimating the importance of state power, infused with the love of identity, engaged in resentment and indignation. But the love for identity is not something the left is immune from, quite the contrary. Identity politics is a regressive and crippling contraction of the entire social body that is fundamentally rewriting the rules of political engagement; being together becomes a way of sharing one’s loneliness, not fighting a common enemy.

In his 1896 speech ‘The Will to Believe’, William James warned,

We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces.

Hardt and Negri end their exhortation with a wish: 'we have not yet seen what is possible when the multitude assembles', and throughout the book they usefully remind readers that the order of global capitalism, despite mystifications of its unitary force, can only empower its own destruction and push forward a deadly drive. Whether we press on the accelerator or change its course remains to be seen indeed.

Notes

1. Negri was himself caught in the web of incarcerations of the anti-terrorist rampage of the years of led: the so-called Calogero theorem, rather than identifying criminally culpable acts and individuals who carried them out, sought to interpret a whole wave of social conflict as the artifice of a few manipulative masterminds. Calogero was the name of the public prosecutor of the trials of 1979, who encouraged the judiciary to carry out a process of Inquisition based on the reading of Marxist texts, pamphlets, books and leaflets, in order to identify those whom it alleged had intellectually mandated a variety of criminal acts of violent political intimidation.
2. This is an influential 1970's text by Jo Freeman widely debated in social movements past and present. It originally addressed the poor public relations practices of a radical women's movement that failed to elect spokespeople, relied on informal structures of decision-making and allowed these to result in forms of inner circles elitism (<http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm>).
3. The widespread movement against the professionalisation of politics has not dented the professionalisation of activism, despite the fact that assemblies see facilitators' 'know-how' increasingly turn into a form of internal policing, particularly of language.
4. For more on this, see Carlo Vercellone 'The Common as a Mode of Production. Towards a critique of the political economy of common goods', *Generation-online*, http://generation-online.org/c/fc_rent14.htm

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