

first publication

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1 Hardt, Michael/Negri, Antonio:
Empire. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard
UP 2000.

2 *Ibid.*, p. xii-xiii.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

4 Morris, Meaghan: *Too Soon, Too
Late: History in Popular Culture*.
Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana
UP 1998, p. 208.

5 Baudrillard, Jean: *The Ecstasy of
Communication*. Trans. by John
Johnson. In: Foster, Hal (Ed.): *The
Anti-Aesthetic*. Seattle: Bay Press
1983, pp. 126-234., here p. 127.

6 Baudrillard, Jean: *America*. Trans.
by Chris Turner. London: Verso 1988.

7 Hardt/Negri 2000, p. 8.

8 Shami, Seteney: *Prehistories of
Globalization: Circassian Identity in
Motion*. In: Appadurai, Arjun (Ed.):
Globalization. Durham, London:
Duke UP 2001, pp. 220-250., here
p. 220.

Since its publication three years ago, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*¹ has been the subject of much critical debate. As networks are central to the new concept of Empire that Hardt and Negri have introduced, assessing that debate struck me as appropriate contribution to this conference. We can see that centrality, beginning in the *Preface*, where the new »Empire« is contrasted with the modern colonial concept of imperialism in the following terms:

The passage to Empire emerges from the twilight of modern sovereignty. In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a *decentered* and *detritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command. The distinct national colors of the imperialist map of the world have merged and blended in the imperial global rainbow,²

making them harder to locate, but not any less potent. This passage crystallizes the thrust of Hardt and Negri's argument that »the globalization of capitalist production and its world market [is] a fundamentally new situation and a significant historical shift«.³ Meaghan Morris offers a typically trenchant summation of the newness of this situation in her essay *Lunching for the Republic*, in which she interrogates the problems Australia faced, and arguably continues to face, in making the shift from colonial to republican mentality as follows:

The old nationalism was a *protectionist* as well as a racist settlement that thrived on Australia's cultural and physical isolation. What sort of unity can be projected for a free-trading nation at the mercy of world economic forces that no government can control? For a society unable effectively to legitimize its norms with reference to a common culture, yet with large numbers of citizens yearning to do so? For a technologically constituted public sphere not only open to global information flows and regional political pressures but providing the first simultaneously national image-space in Australian history?⁴

I am questioning here not the newness of this historical situation as such, but rather the newness of its texture of economic, national and technological concerns and of the arguments Morris, Hardt and Negri are making about it. In the early 1980's Jean Baudrillard, for example, similarly noted in *The Ecstasy of Communication*, that:

Something has changed, and the Faustian, Promethean (perhaps Oedipal) period of production and consumption gives way to the »proteinic« era of networks, to the narcissistic and protean era of connections, contact, contiguity, feedback and generalized interface that goes with the universe of communication⁵,

while a few years later in *America*⁶ he highlighted the techno-national economic nexus of that universe. Almost twenty years later, however, Hardt and Negri find it frustrating that: »Many contemporary theorists are [still] reluctant to recognize«⁷ these changes. What I want to show here is how misrecognizing, or refusing to accept, these changes leads many of the critiques leveled at *Empire* to simply miss the theoretical mark, which is substantively based on, and in turn riddled by, modern paradox, and I'll do so by establishing the world exhibitions, a prototypically modern institution if ever there was one, as an integral element in *Empire's* prehistory.

One must admit that claiming that something is »fundamentally new« is in itself hardly new. It's not a postmodern move, but rather a modern one. Like Ezra Pound with his famous rallying cry, Hardt and Negri are attempting to generate forward propulsion by making a decisive break with a particular past, so it behooves us to first establish precisely which past that is. As Seteney Shami points out in *Prehistories of Globalization: Circassian Identity in Motion*, her contribution to the *Public Culture* millennial issue on globalization edited by Arjun Appadurai, modernity has invented »an array of pasts. There is the past as Tradition, a timeless, static past whose value lies not in explanation but in revealing the alter ego either as the anachronistic self or the distant other«⁸. There is also the past as »History«, one variant of which »focuses on the rise of European hegemony« and another of which is evolutionary. A

9 Ibid., p. 221

10 Ibid., p. 221.

11 Hard/Negri 2000, p. xv-xvi.

12 Ibid., p. xvii.

13 Ibid., p. 70.

14 Cf. Deleuze, Gilles/Guattari, Felix: *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane. London: Athlone Press 1984.

15 http://www.republicart.net/disc/empire/pinguino1_en.htm

16 Marchart, Oliver: *The Crossed Place of the Political Party*. In: http://www.republicart.net/disc/empire/marcharto2_en.htm

17 Ibid.

further variation is the past as ›Civilization‹, »a foundation myth featuring the migrations of the spirit of the West from Ancient Greece to present-day democracies«⁹. Shami reminds us that »Anthropology, history, archaeology and other disciplines jostle one another [all the time] to lay authoritative claims to the[se] pasts«¹⁰ and encourages us to attend to what she calls the »prehistories« of globalization: the kinds of pasts invented in globalization discourse.

It is evident from the beginning of the passage above – »The passage to Empire emerges from the twilight of modern sovereignty« – that Hardt and Negri's past is unabashedly dialectical. Indeed, the past Hardt and Negri recount, which occupies the central portion of the book, takes the form of a »genealogy« of sovereignty and the capitalist mode of production:¹¹ the latter – capitalist mode of production – because, as they write, »the realm of production is where social inequalities are clearly revealed and, moreover, where the most effective resistances and alternatives to the power of Empire arise«,¹² while the former, modern sovereignty, is central because it »functioned as the cornerstone of the construction of Eurocentrism«¹³ and its ensuing colonizing reach. One might wonder that such a straightforward Marxist accounting of how the world has gotten into the mess it has generated the amount of debate it has until one remembers that this debate has been conducted primarily in the discourse of political theory and economy, in other words: within a particular network of primarily Euro-American social scientists with particular political concerns of their own. At the AAASS (*American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies*) conference in November 2003, the plight of »the left« was the topic of a lively roundtable discussion. The familiar traumatic history of adversities and hurdles was trotted out: the double whammy of Khrushchev's secret speech against Stalin and the McCarthy trials in the 1950s, the failures of '68 and then of communism altogether.

Against this backdrop of the delegitimation of Marxism, it's not difficult to appreciate the increasingly warm relations that developed between the American, and also West German, academic »left« and Eastern European dissident intellectuals, led by the lynchpins of Václav Havel and Slavoj Žižek. It's also not difficult to appreciate that both sides found post-Marxism, the liberal language of universal rights and also each other most welcome. This is a productive context in which to situate the agitational efforts of not yet (as opposed to always already) post-Marxist continental theorists from Baudrillard through Deleuze and Guattari¹⁴ to Negri and Hardt because if they are understood as reassertions of a non-liberal, non-universal rights-based critique, then one can also situate and move beyond such critiques of them.

As is enumerated very helpfully in a review article on the website *republic art*,¹⁵ critiques of *Empire* have generally focused on its style, on its overstating trends to draw attention to them, on its not being empirical enough, and on its not offering pragmatic, concrete solutions to the crises it diagnoses. Let me give a concrete example. In a piece called *The Crossed Place of the Political Party*, Oliver Marchart critiques Hardt and Negri for their lack of attention to the nuts and bolts of political organization:

Hardt and Negri see the new revolutionary subject – which would purportedly be linked by the transversal lines – in the intellectual proletariat of immaterial work. However, this ›proletariat‹ is not organized, and it is certainly not politically organized, but rather consists solely of grinning monads at your service (›service with a smile‹) or IT specialists with a happy shareholder consciousness, which Hardt/Negri euphemistically invoke as *multitude*. With Hardt and Negri there is a secret automatism that turns this ›mass intelligence‹ into a political subject with no further ado. Yet no one knows how that should work in reality. How isolated immaterial workers are linked and thus organized into a political force is not even investigated and conceptualized, but only celebrated with the poetic concept of the *multitude*.¹⁶

It is the »poeticism« of Hardt and Negri's work that seems to particularly rile Marchart:

The problem with theoreticians like Deleuze, Guattari, Negri and Hardt is that none of them argue, they just sing: they become entangled in poetic allusions and suggestions, in a poeticizing evocation of a new political subject. As Katja Diefenbach aptly says: ›unbelievably kitschy, but charming.‹¹⁷

Rather than enter into and engage with this seductively condescending form of critique, I am more interested in its expectations and its resolutely empiricist rejection of poetic allusions. James Donald's riposte in a similar debate with political theorists was to declare himself »enough of a Gramscian to insist that if democracy is to have any substantial reality, then it

18 Donald, James: *Imagining the Modern City*. Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press 1999, p. 151.

19 Eco, Umberto: *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*. Trans. by William Weaver. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co. 1986, p. 293.

20 Hardt/Negri 2000, p. 400.

needs to be rooted in the soil of culture and not just constitutional arrangements or in the etiquette of citizenship¹⁸; I, too, find the outright rejection of cultural practices in favor of pragmatically political ones problematic. However, if one accepts part of Hardt and Negri's argument – that the organization of place-bound political parties is becoming increasingly ineffectual the more the imperial global rainbow merges and blends – then recourse to any form of soil, cultural or political, also has to be rethought. As anti-globalization movements and academic conference organizers have discovered, it is no longer possible to organize effectively without becoming virtual, which often necessitates operating in a *lingua franca* that is not one's own. While the scope of this article does not permit me to thoroughly explore this non-place where the imperial global rainbow meets the soil of culture, what I would like to show briefly, by way of summation, is how by including the world exhibitions and their ephemerality as part of Empire's theoretical prehistory, the rationale (if not rationality) of Empire becomes apparent and the melodies of its oddly utopian warning more discernable.

As is quite well known, the world exhibitions were monumental, modern gatherings »of the works of industry of all nations« that left behind legacies of nationalism and colonialism, technological progress, the growth of commodity culture, of leisure and of spectacular mass cultural practices as displayed and celebrated on an increasingly unprecedented scale. If one compares these exhibitions (originally called »Great Exhibitions« in Britain, »World's Fairs« in the United States, and »Expositions Universelles« in France but now simply known as »Expos«), to the Oedipal institution of the bourgeois family, which we know from *Anti-Oedipus* as the kind of organization that must colonize its members, repress their desires, and give them complexes if it is to function as an organizing principle of contemporary society, then the opposite kind of mechanism by which the world exhibitions work becomes apparent, namely that the basis of their organization was not to repress but rather to fuel desires, modern desires in the first instance for things, especially newly invented things like steam-engines, but also for exoticized lands and periods of history, as well as for place-bound forms of identification. Made possible by, while at the same time necessitating, improvements in communication and transportation technologies, what were the world exhibitions if not networks? And whether or not they were the first to bring together on a global scale the like-minded in such a great variety of trades and vocations, I would throw down as a kind of theoretical gauntlet the challenge to find earlier such instances. The wager is that concentrating on networks, understood in this context specifically as globally oriented virtual links maintained primarily for the purposes of fueling desire-driven profit, offers a way of rewriting the history of imperialist conquest and colonization in terms of *Empire* and the colonizing encroachment on our lifeworlds that living in Hong Kong makes one particularly aware of. I think this is what Umberto Eco was ironically gesturing towards when he wrote in *Travels in Hyper-Reality* that: »It was only with the expositions of the nineteenth century that the marvels of the year 2000 began to be announced.«¹⁹

Networks, like Empire, the world exhibitions and to a large extent also a place like Hong Kong, are sustained, as Hardt and Negri make clear, by a dilemma: »it needs workers but also needs to deny them citizenship so that it can maintain political control.« That is why Hardt and Negri's utopian call is for their poetical multitude to demand global citizenship, not because such a thing is realistic but because it's important that it continue to exist as, maybe not a seed but, a virus in the global imagination, a latent potentiality, so that »rather than being forced constantly to be on the move«,²⁰ the multitude is challenged to imagine circumstances in which it is in a position to decide if, when, where and under what circumstances it moves or not. Why that's not a song worth singing, I really don't know. Why should we not do work that aspires not only to identify, but also to effectively disrupt, disable and prevent the further reproduction of networks? Or to phrase it differently – why should we not in our work aspire to fair treatment?

Susan Ingram is lecturer in the Dept. of Comparative Literature at the University of Hong Kong and one of the co-editors of the web journal *Spaces of Identity* (www.spacesofidentity.net). Her interests include autobiographical writing, modern European culture, film, gender and translation studies.

Contact: svingram@hkucc.hku.hk