

**COLETTE ST-HILAIRE, with contributions and translation by
ERÍN MOURE / Biopolitics for the 21st Century**

The following review of *Commonwealth*, by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, has not only been translated, but also adapted, shortened and then expanded, together with its author, from an article originally prepared by her for *Conjonctures*, a Quebec journal of socio-political thought. It represents a view from Quebec, from a friend who has been one of my most important interlocutors for well over a decade. We both think it urgent to consider structures and concepts from an economic and socio-political standpoint. No ecopoetics can be separate from this, however radical it wills itself to be.

—ERÍN MOURE

It's been ten years since Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, a global analysis of the crisis that began at the end of the 1960s and that—jostled by workers' demands, popular movements, and mobilizations of peoples in former colonies—has seen capitalism mutate significantly. *Empire*, the concept Hardt and Negri elaborated to capture these transformations, is characterized by an absence of frontiers, with sovereignty more often exercised not through nations but through supranational institutions to which waning nation-states delegate their powers. In *Empire*, wealth creation, exploitation, and domination extend beyond the sphere of material work into the production of life itself, through the management and mobilization of bodies and minds. *Empire* is a biopolitical machine in which capitalism is pushed to its limits and, shaken by the struggles of the *multitude*, attempts to claim new ground.

Although *Empire* echoed overwhelmingly with readers (selling hundreds of thousands of copies), it left questions: Isn't the nation-state still essential to capital? How is value created in immaterial forms of production? And, crucially, is the multitude capable of political action? In 2004, Hardt and Negri addressed the difficulties raised by their theses in *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, a book that grapples further with the dynamic of structural transformations. In 2011, their *Commonwealth* opens with the recognition that globalization has

created a common world that we share, and which has no “outside” (of capital, of Empire) upon which to found our actions. It is from the midst of this common world that we must sketch out an ethics of political action for the 21st century.

The Struggle for the Common

In our time, say Hardt and Negri, capital has turned to exploit the *common*. On one hand, this refers to the common wealth of the material world—air, water, fruits of the soil, and all that we consider to be “nature’s bounty.” But common wealth also includes intangibles—knowledges, languages, codes, information, affects and other products of social life. To increase value, capital must expropriate all this wealth from the common. Thus, we see the rise of private control of the media and of education, public planning, health, and of aspects of the military and of scientific research, among other things, as well as that of water, minerals, topographies.

In a process modeled on that of Marx, *Commonwealth* explores the changes in capital and biopolitical labour. Hardt and Negri identify three tendencies: the prevalence of **immaterial production**; the **feminization** of work—in terms of the generalization of tasks, working conditions and qualities traditionally associated with women (flexibility, irregular schedules, focus on communication and human relations); and the patterns and processes of **migration** and social-racial mixing. All these factors have brought the global labour marketplace an abundant, precarious workforce which capital must both foster and control in order to exploit, and which constantly threatens to escape its purview.

Capital faces new challenges: how can it account for creativity and affect? How can working hours be enumerated when work and life are not easily separable? In the production of commodities and creation of surplus value, a social relationship is also produced. Labour thus possesses creative potential that always exceeds the conditions that frame it, so that capital is never fully able to contain it. As Hardt and Negri note, citing Marx via Foucault: *l’homme produit l’homme*.

This is even more true in the era of biopolitical production, which requires exchanges and fluidity impossible to control from above. Cooperation and creativity cannot be obtained through injunctions; they overflow timetables and pass through corporate walls. Regardless of how capital multiplies its controls and reinstates borders in the open world it has created, the multitude will always elude it.

By its very nature, biopolitical production must shake off external control to be productive. In requiring a greater autonomy of labour, it places capital before a contradiction: any effort on the part of capital to tighten controls on this production harms productivity. As such, the producing multitude has the potential to engage in autonomous processes that could break down capital and create new forms of common life. This potential is key in *Commonwealth*, and has major political repercussions.

The Politics of the Multitude: Exodus

Without vanguards, parties, or revolutionary organizations to lead them, the actors in the Arab Springs and the protesters in Spain and Greece in 2011 have defied those in power and pushed their leaders to resign or alter their course. In their actions, how can we not see that the multitude has political capacity? Hardt and Negri, sensing a political opening in the world situation, hypothesize that future struggles will take the form of exodus: “a process of subtraction from the relationship with capital by means of actualizing the potential of labour-power. Not a refusal of the productivity of biopolitical labour-power but rather a refusal of the increasingly restrictive fetters placed on its productive capacities by capital” (152).

They go on to analyze forms of the common. The metropolis is a large reservoir. Originally organized to feed industry, the city has now become biopolitical, involving communications networks, cultural practices, intellectual circuits, affective networks, and social institutions. In some domains there have been attempts to control and privatize this immense wealth: media, land development, financial institutions, and education become contested sites.

The common also includes corrupt forms such as family, corporation, and nation, which impose hierarchies and exclusions and act as tools for the reproduction of capital. The multitude faces the double task of mobilizing the common and beneficial resources of social institutions (communication networks, available resources, etc.) as levers to escape controls that limit access to the common and, at the same time, of steering clear of corrupt forms.

In the context of biopolitical production, opening access to the common means refusing control over production and reproduction; from there, it is possible to extricate from capital and engage in an autonomous process of creation of new

forms of social life. For this reason, say Hardt and Negri, exodus is the major form of class struggle in our time.

Organizing the Multitude

How can value-creating forces be organized in one body or form, when production extends across the entire social territory? How to unite a proletariat made nomadic by precarity and flexibility? Hardt and Negri maintain that the multitude does not need to be represented by a vanguard or party. These forms of organization date from an epoch when factories were staffed with professional workers, skilled and unskilled, who organized and joined trade unions and vanguard parties. In our day, the authors claim, these forms of organization are anachronistic. The multitude can organize itself autonomously. More and more, workers are directly responsible for production; they evade surveillance even as surveillance increases; they organize themselves in parallel networks that resist the vertical structures typical of parties or unions.

In contrast to the people, whose unity stems from a will to avoid the anarchy of the state of nature and which becomes a hegemonic force standing above the plural social field (168), the multitude becomes political in its interactions with nature. To support this thesis, Hardt and Negri cite philosopher Judith Butler and biologist Ann Fausto-Sterling, whose feminist investigations have allowed us to deconstruct the idea of a nature that is fixed and immutable, separate from and prior to social relationships. In fact, nature and bodies are incessantly modulated by social practices. For Hardt and Negri, an “ecology of the common” includes nature and society, and considers both human and nonhuman worlds to be part of an interconnected dynamic. Nature cannot be separated from the forces at work on human beings: biological, political, and economic. This brings us to a constituent ontology: *being* means engaging in a process of *becoming* shaped by social action. Thus ecopoetics or other ecological focii cannot be considered separately from social action across networks that are not wholly “natural.”

The notion of the common, in fact, includes much that exceeds the usual notion of nature. Here the project of the multitude breaks with traditions elaborated in philosophy by Locke and Rousseau: where once progress acted to tame nature or submit it to the rule of property, the multitude now must work to conserve the

common, to establish the conditions of its production, promote beneficial forms and combat its detrimental dimensions. In a biopolitics, the multitude does not break free of nature or nurture it from an outside; it works instead inside the common that traverses all of nature, culture, and society. Romantic contemplation of an idealized and beautiful nature, as if from outside the web of forces that create it, is of no use here.

Is the multitude then an autonomous political subject, outside the power of capital, whose project is one founded on the veracity of its own interests? Not so. Evoking Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Hardt and Negri advance the idea of a political subject constituted at the very heart of the mechanisms of power-knowledge. Neither fundamentally free nor fundamentally alienated, subjects emerge on the terrain of political and social struggle. The *nature* that production transforms is subjectivity itself. The crucial task is thus to intervene in the circuits of production of this subjectivity, to flee the mechanisms of control and to construct the bases for an autonomous production of subjectivity that enhances the common.

The political potential of the multitude is actualized whenever the *event* is produced: when production exceeds the limits of capital, in other words, when subjects choose lines of flight, are joined by others, and create anew. This, the authors avow, harnesses an imminent human capacity for indignation, in the Spinozist sense of the term, meaning the power to “act against oppression and to challenge the causes of our collective suffering.” Hardt and Negri invoke the history of *jacqueries*, populist uprisings fuelled directly by indignation and conditioned by what was directly perceived as oppressive: workers who smash the machines of their trade, for example. In biopolitical society, where production of value is concomitant with the production of forms of life, indignation is what calls capital into question. Power and resistance are isomorphous, however, as Foucault has shown; revolt, curiously, can involve the very characteristics of the thing being resisted. This can be seen in the August 2011 riots in London, England, where the fury directed at capitalism and at recessionary politics was played out by looting and exchanging the very products that oppressive capital produces. In our era, such revolts are biopolitical, and express the reality not just of “downtrodden masses” but of the common, and cannot be read as meaningless, even if a program seems lacking or is not clear. The controls of the neoliberal state acting in the interests

of capital (long jail sentences, police searches) will never prevent these outflows of indignation. As French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy has said, a human life creates sense, in working; this is its work. In England, in Spain, Greece and elsewhere, and more recently in the North American Occupy movements, human beings are simply carrying out their work: the constant emergence of subjectivity, its sense, cannot be resolved on the plane of control.

Hardt and Negri, in *Commonwealth*, return to the figure of the metropolis to try to understand these spaces of resistance and biopolitical production. The metropolis is the multitude's "body without organs," which is to say, with Deleuze and Guattari, that it is a body composed of intensities, a factory for the production of events. The metropolis is to the multitude what the factory once was to the working class, and its qualities are becoming generalized in cities across the planet. Is this not what we have seen as well in the Greek, Spanish or Arab spring revolts of 2011, where plural forces flee dominant institutions and launch a process aimed at creating new forms of economic, social, cultural, and political life?

This leads, however, to an even more difficult question: can an insurrectional moment be translated into durable forms of life?

Government and the Multitude

The neoliberal transition and the new American unilateralism have failed to overcome the crisis of post-Fordist capitalism, a crisis underpinned by the ontology of biopolitical labour. The neoliberal model can only rechannel wealth, disinherit workers and destroy the common. Yet knowledge is becoming social, and cannot be contained in a product cycle: forms of work appear that reject productivism. Breakdowns in production escape capital and the system is having difficulty in fully ensuring its own reproduction. "The forms of intellectual, affective, and cognitive labour that are emerging in the central role in the contemporary economy cannot be controlled by the forms of discipline and command developed in the era of the factory society" (264). But how can this historical moment be seized for other ends?

For Hardt and Negri, socialism can no longer meet the challenge, for it is a regime "for the promotion and regulation of industrial capital, a regime of work and discipline imposed through government and bureaucratic institutions" (269). It engenders the same contradictions as neoliberal capitalism; to monopolize surplus

value, it has to alienate producing singularities, seize control of cooperation, and expropriate the common, all of which undermines the very goals of socialism. Is social democracy more effective? The authors don't think so. Socializing capital can't resolve the impasses in which production is caught, without hampering social production. The chronic unemployment that plagues the developed world and the overqualified labour force observed in emerging economies are convincing examples of this. In effect, when the work day no longer has borders and exceeds the framework of "employment," the entire society becomes the site of production and of struggle. A multitude composed of autonomous subjectivities escapes the social-democratic State in the same way that it flees the dictates of capital. Spain and Greece are overwhelming examples of this.

It's not that we must reject reform: no one can fault State intervention to stop the destruction of the planet or to redistribute wealth. But it's clear that this State, however social-democratic it may be, will run up against the same contradictions as the neoliberal one. In the end, biopolitical production draws its energy from the bottom of the pyramid, and must be guided by a *multitudinal* entrepreneurship.

Hardt and Negri cannot define the political program of the multitude. But, following Marx, and Quesnay before him, they construct a *tableau économique* of the common and use it to elicit some cues. Firstly, the multitude must defend the freedom of biopolitical labour in the face of precarity, migration, and other forms of domination. Think here of the migrant workers who defy the barriers erected against their freedom of movement, or the citizens who rise up and clamour about things that they are told do not concern them, such as shale gas or genetically-modified food. In the biopolitical era, political equality at the bottom of the pyramid is a productivity factor.

The defense of democracy must ensure that its institutions support the autonomy of biopolitical production. Democracy here departs from mere representation. Its focus is the struggle of the common against the stranglehold of capital. Citing Ernesto Laclau, the authors of *Commonwealth* explain that representation is the only mechanism that allows diversity to be united; in other words, it allows plural subjects to be united under a guiding idea, a ruler, a State, transforming the multitude into a people. However, this movement is shadowed by a second process of cleavage between the representatives and the represented,

leaving but a unified and hegemonic elected force in its wake. This structure restrains biopolitical production because it undermines its foundations: the freedom and necessary autonomy of plural subjects. The hegemonic force of a social-democratic government elected by a people who accept to be represented can, it is true, allow preservation of the spaces of the common. But it is an obstacle to creation of new instances of common life.

Finally, it falls to the multitude to defend social life, which no longer is a given in the new context where labour constantly overflows the walls and schedules of factories or offices. This means fighting for infrastructures from drinking water to environmental protection, and even science and technology, and for the instruments of social and intellectual life: education, information, and open access to knowledge and to artistic production are essential. In the end, it is up to the multitude, not elected representatives, to create new, autonomous social institutions that allow the common to flourish without expropriations.

There is no question of waiting for capitalism to collapse in the hope that a new world will arise on its ruins. Nor is it a question of planning, in the socialist tradition, a transfer of wealth and power from the capitalist class to the socialist State. The strategic line proposed by *Commonwealth* is that the multitude progressively free itself from capital and the State by means of education, cooperation, and events or encounters, and thus guide the creation of a world that is more and more common. Rather than directing revolt toward seizing the State, the challenge is to solidify gains made during insurrectional moments, consolidate new practices—in short, to build institutions from moments, at the heart of a process that always remains insurrectional.

Commonwealth is rigorous and logical in its philosophy and politics. It does, however, open many questions regarding biopolitics, ethics, ecology, the event, and the political organization of the multitude. The book can leave us indignant or despondent, or we can choose to live with the trouble that the work provokes and welcome and use the space of debate that Negri and Hardt open.