

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

Empire is an enormously attractive book if you are a postmodern communist (which I think I am, although I am not sure). In the text, capitalism is posed as an unqualified evil (satisfying the communist) and the decentered social order of the late 20th, early 21st century will be the source of its undoing (satisfying the postmodernist). Moreover, the revolution is a “will;” a postmodern-communist undoing of capitalism must come. As Hardt and Negri pose it, the heterogeneity of Empire, based in globalization and postmodern communication, is shadowed by a homogeneous labouring class that has been expanded by Empire’s dispersed nature. It (the labouring class) has been given the tools by Empire – precisely high tech communication and unprecedented internationalization – through which it will overthrow its elusive master (Empire itself). *Empire* thus allows the reader to maintain the universalist, utopic dreams of a communist while seeing the diversity of the postmodern world as important to the realization of that utopia.

At the center of this promised postmodern communism is the concept of Empire itself, which is supposedly separate from empires (note the lowercase “e”) as we traditionally conceive of them. The difference is that Empire involves the renunciation of empire. In the wake of two world wars and the dissolution of nineteenth and early twentieth century “new” empires, argue Hardt and Negri, discourse – be it official political, popular, or academic – has been oriented away from the right to dominate other identities and thus encouraged the egalitarian multiplying of world identities. This has been facilitated by the unique monetary conditions of the post-War world. Since the Bretton Woods treaty, Hardt and Negri posit, the spread of American style capitalist practices has encouraged the play to and creation of differences among groups and individuals in order to diversify and expand capital markets. This has created the “cool” world of postmodernism – liberal and multicultural – that has been acknowledge by figures from Jameson to Lyotard to Baudrillard. Hardt and Negri emphasize its redeeming qualities. Empire has put liberation and free movement on the mind and into the practices and routines of many individuals around the world. It has also given them a degree of comfort to the idea of difference at the levels of culture and communication – comfort that can only facilitate the fraternization and eventual solidarity of individuals and groups. Thus, Empire, insofar as it is equitable with capitalism (and specifically Americanism), is dubious. However, the new element of Empire, the renunciation of constraint, makes it strangely productive, worth embracing, and intriguing for leftists who also want to embrace the postmodern.

After finishing *Empire*, however, I picked up my copy of *The Communist Manifesto*. Two quotes stuck out to me:

The real fruit of the [proletarian] battle is not the immediate results, but in the ever expanding union of workers. This union is furthered by the improved means of communication which are created by modern industry and which places the workers of different localities in contact with one another.

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption...it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it still stood. All old-established national industries that no longer work-up indigenous raw material but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed not only at home, but in every corner of the globe...we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of all nations.

Marx suggests something very similar to Hardt and Negri – that the diffusion of capital-induced technological progress is ultimately good for the working class as those at the head of capital interests are unwittingly giving away the tools for their defeat. And while Marx may not have precisely been a contemporary multiculturalist, one cannot get a better description of globalization and its relationship to culturally, or at least nationally, diverse people.

At best, the comparison to Marx here only amounts to the charge that the ideas proposed in *Empire* are not new. A lack of newness is okay – generating new social and historical theories is hard, and valuable old ones are worth repeating. At worst, the comparison to Marx amounts to the charge of posturing. Hardt and Negri are not really postmodernists, nor do they give a post-modern infusion into Marx. *Empire*, insofar as it is commensurate with post-modernism, only *incidentally* provides the tools for liberation from it. Workers' class-consciousness and struggle to organize is still the basis for liberation. Communication – one of the supposed “postmodern” element of *Empire* – will not do alone: one still needs adverse material experience. That is to say that while making overtures to inhabiting and “liking” the postmodern, Hardt and Negri really oppose it. In truth, the point is overcoming and rejecting post-modernism's pleasures and “coolness,” even though the structural apparatuses that create them are useful to a certain extent.

Such a stance in relation to the contemporary global order might be redeeming, duplicitous, or not about its real stance on postmodernism. I am, for example, torn over the postmodern renunciation (late 20th century) of the mod-

ern (post-Enlightenment). It seems valuable to me when the modern is constraining and conformist and not so valuable when it plays into an “Empire”-like regime itself. However, this tension between the modern and the postmodern reveals the central tension in the text. This is expressed in two quotes as well:

...the concept of Empire presents itself not as a historical regime originating in conquest, but rather as an order that effectively suspends history and thereby fixes the existing state of affairs for eternity.

Imperial corruption is already undermined by the productivity of bodies, by cooperation and by the multitude’s design of productivity. The only event that we are still awaiting is the construction, or rather insurgence, of a powerful organization.... Thus we wait only the maturation of the political development of [the multitude].

The point is essentially this: as Hardt and Negri pose it, Empire, is, on one hand, an unbreakable regime whose power might be counteracted from time to time, but never completely overturned. This is a postmodern proposition. It is the image of dispersed yet institutionalized power weaving its way essentially uncontradicted through networks of governmentality. On the other hand, Empire is on the verge of its collapse, needing only a push from a self-conscious proletariat. This is a communist proposition. This is why, according to Marx, the proletariat needed to make the “forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions.” Historical logic, though, does not allow for both. In fact, it only allows for one: Marx’s idea. Revolution demands time and change. They alone provide the space in which new social forms, individual experiences and political institutions will take shape. *Empire*, then, in feeling compelled to make an overture to postmodernism, treads with one foot in the ahistorical. This may only be an affectation. However, it is an affectation that would deny the space for historical transformation that is necessary for the overthrow of Empire, or any other regime.

This does not mean that *Empire* is not worth the read. Quite the contrary. In many ways, it gives us a similar mapping of the postmodern age as that provided to the modern in Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto*. Hardt and Negri lay out the contemporary social, economic, and political landscape of the world in large, comprehensive blocks. Their bold images of the postmodern (the “regime” and the stoppage of time) make us want to read more. But by only making an overture to the postmodern – an ultimately false gesture in its direction – Hardt and Negri miss the possibility that a *genuine* joining of postmod-

ernism and communism holds out: the ground to struggle against history whether we believe in its stoppage or not. If history is in motion, as Marx suggests that it must be for revolutionary change to occur, then we need to work to overcome what Walter Benjamin called “the one single catastrophe” that it has been. This becomes the reason, as Benjamin also put it, to “brush history against the grain,” or change the course of historical time and events. Yet, post-modern stoppages of history do not need to be viewed as antithetical to this cause. They might also be viewed as a means to “brush history against the grain.” They may provide us with an immanent experience of power, a “present-ness” for it, that would stand as a reason to resist it and rearrange it. Either way, we would be engaged in struggle, which seems to me to be the point. It seems to me that only in struggle may we “oppose the existing social and political order of things,” as Marx put it. Surely Hardt and Negri would like to do that in George Bush’s America and Silvio Berlusconi’s Italy. Why not provide us with the largest number of means for doing so?

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Laurel Sefton MacDowell, *Renegade Lawyer: The Life of J.L. Cohen* (Toronto: The Osgoode Society/University of Toronto Press, 2001).

In a liberal democracy such as Canada, which professes to be ruled by law, lawyers are important and the ideology of lawyers important for the diverse roles they play both inside and beyond the law. A few lawyers have sought to extend law’s frontiers, not in order to forge a new weapon for class warfare but to ensure that the fundamental, legal, and democratic rights of the working class are respected by the ruling class. Among the first and most important of them was the subject of this book, a lawyer who worked both within and against the system in order to change it. Jacob Lawrence Cohen (1897-1950) was born in Manchester, England, and came to Canada in 1907. Called to the Ontario bar in 1918, within twenty years he had become Canada’s most prominent labour and civil-liberties lawyer. J.L. Cohen did not so much invent labour law as invent the idea that law should serve labour’s interests as well as management’s; that workers had something significant to gain from law’s hegemony. Cohen was a left-winger who not only acted for the Communist Party and trade union organizers, but also served as legal counsel for the new industrial unions, pro-