

field — for teaching or research purposes — this book is highly recommended.

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Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *The Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1994)

Few cultural activists and even fewer academics have either the talent or nerve to talk about communism as if it were still a viable social philosophy. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have both. Against the hackneyed postmodernist claim that the world is an unstable whirl of language-games which offers us no neutral ground from which to make rational claims on matters of truth and social justice, in *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form*, they insist that substantive categories like capital, labour and class struggle are still “the most useful terms for political and social analysis.”

Though Hardt and Negri readily admit in their first chapter, “Communism as Critique,” that we are living in the postmodern age, they insist that its trademark is not ubiquitous textuality but the ubiquity of capitalism. Postmodern capitalism is computerized, flexible, service-oriented, increasingly intellectual and transnational, very much like the historical phase Marx called the “real subsumption” of labour, where the law of capital outgrows industrial production and penetrates every part of civil society. It may be true, as the post-Marxists never stop reminding us, that the centrality of the working class dissolves in the postmodern age, but Hardt and Negri salvage the pivotal concept of labour by lifting it out of its narrow industrial context and refiguring it as a poeticized, “Dionysian” activity that “produces life and constitutes society ... in both the realm of work and that of nonwork.” labour produces wealth, but it also produces sociality: subjective and radically

autonomous ways of collective thinking and acting — the “affective capacities” of female health workers and AIDS activists are their two examples — are no less central to the emancipatory project than the vendible toil of waged workers. The point is that if capital is everywhere, and if labour is becoming more immaterial, then the antagonism we usually associate with the working class can no longer be limited to the shop floor. Hence the authors propose “the refusal of waged labor and the development of intellectual productive forces” as complementary tactics for opposing postmodern capital.

Chapters Two through Five are wonderfully nuanced and sometimes knotty essays written between 1964 and 1975 by Negri, founder of the Italian *Autonomia* movement and currently teaching political science at the University of Paris. Each argument describes how labour — both in the form of the working class *and* as a metaphor for the enlarged concept of Dionysian creativity — has been repressed by the modern —and postmodern —state apparatus. “Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State” first appeared in 1967. Here Negri examines how the working class brought about irreversible changes in the structure of the state, first during the October Revolution of 1917 and then after the financial crisis of 1929. Keynes, the first to theorize these changes in any substantial way, argued that the crash of 1929 occurred because an excess in the supply of goods was not matched by an increase in consumption. Rather than think of demand as an abstract response to supply, as the other half of the equilibrium model, Negri reads it symbolically, identifying consumption as the workers’ bargaining chip. “To refer to ‘demand,’” he says, “is to refer to the working class, to a mass movement that has found a political identity, to a possibility of insurrection and subversion of the system.” The Keynesian plan for preventing economic breakdowns by stimulating demand by government investment may be couched as a concession to the working class — witness the affable rhetoric of New Dealism and the postwar consensus — but for Negri it is symptomatic of the modern state’s deep anxiety over the workers’ “project for the destruction of the capitalist mode of production.”

Playing on Keynes' uncanny nickname for the working class — the "Party of Catastrophe" — Negri reveals in the unfolding reformist narrative of the Welfare State a repressed fear that the balance of power is inevitably shifting towards working people.

He uncovers a similar repression in the next chapter, "Labor in the Constitution." As a result of the growth in capital accumulation during the first half of the twentieth century, Western governments were forced to recognize the value of labour in society. As an example, Negri cites the Italian Constitution of 1948, whose first article states categorically that the nation is "founded on labor." It sounds explicitly socialist, but Negri's point is that such recognitions are a semantic sham. Preambles and administrative texts pay lip service to the progressive view of labour as immanently tied to the politics of working-class liberation, but in effect they abstract labour from its real conditions and pose it as a catchword for the social psychology of mass production. This abstraction initiates a new idea of the state — the "State of social capital," Negri calls it, in which labour loses its radical edge and is reduced to a synonym of the capitalist work ethic, which is in turn elevated to the status of an *a priori* foundation for the constitution of modern society. Labour means a lot more than work, this is Negri's point. But under the spell of economism, the modern state calibrates everything to the work ethic and so renders social life a perpetual exercise in servicing the economy. How well does Negri succeed in proving that the narrow capitalist view of labour as work is a harmful one? Of course, one's evaluation will be determined by the stance one takes toward his/her interpretation of the state's role vis-à-vis the political aspirations of the working class.

In the next chapter, "Communist State Theory," Negri argues that, for all the reformist language encoded in the interventionist policies of the Welfare State, the modern state develops at the expense of worker autonomy. This is because every working-class struggle is at once a "struggle for communism" and a "struggle for the extinction of the State," the state being nothing more than an organizer of waged labour, an "ideal collective capitalist" to use Engels' excellent phrase. Here Negri is targeting the official left's

long-standing love affair with the state, and in his next chapter, “The State and Public Spending,” he criticizes the other half of the equation, the neo-conservative perception that public spending is an unproductive socialist gimmick. For him, public spending legitimates capitalist enterprise and at the same time organizes workers in the public sector, though not for the sake of liberating them but rather to recuperate their “political form” to a more productive, nonpolitical end. Significantly, however, even as public spending signals the evolution of the state of social capital (i.e., the expansion of capital into every part of society) it also opens the way to thinking about work not in exclusively productivist terms but in terms of “the social terrain of production.” The revolutionary potential accompanying this transition from the industrial “worker society” to the postmodern “social worker” is the subject of the last two chapters.

Written in collaboration with Hardt — who works as a professor of English at Duke University — these final chapters trace the repressive tactics of the state to the point where labour is totally excluded from the constitution of postmodern society. In “Postmodern Law and the Withering of Civil Society” the authors suggest that, as it is described in legal theory, the basic structure of contemporary society appears as “the simulacra of social reality detached from production and labor.” John Rawls’ enormously influential book *Theory of Justice* serves as their target because in it the juridical system is grounded in tautologies and question-begging assumptions. It is the old liberal conundrum of how a society starts: as Rawls has it, an innate “sense of justice” leads people to enter into contracts with one another and into agreements as to what constitutes a just society, and yet the ability to formulate such agreements presupposes the consensual social order they are said to produce. We need to have a sense of democracy before we build democratic institutions, but this democratic sense can only be inculcated by the established institutions of a democratic society. More than a methodological oversight, this conflation of cause and effect, say Hardt and Negri, is motivated by Rawls’ desire to keep history and the dialectical process at bay. By making it look like

liberal democracy arises *in medias res*, that is, without bargaining and negotiating through questions of “labor, production, gender difference, sexual orientation, desire, [and] value,” Rawls betrays the familiar postmodern tendency for rendering society “a simulation of social reality, a depopulated horizon, emptied of all social contents.”

Along with popular advocates of the liberal state such as Richard Rorty and Michael Sandel, Rawls represents in theory the real dismantling of the Welfare State undertaken by Thatcher and Reagan in the 1980s. As Hardt and Negri point out, for all its talk of decentralization and minimal government, the logical end of neo-conservatism is a huge increase in the moral authority of the state, especially in areas like military spending and women’s reproductive rights. Nor is this a side-effect of fiscal restraint, for the collapse of the social safety net and the seemingly inevitable attribution of the welfare role to market forces signals the postmodern state’s desire to be a “system without foundations.” What we are witnessing today is not the end of the state but the withering away of civil society and a realignment of the state to the bare bones totalitarian task of policing and order, what Hardt and Negri contemptuously call the “postmodern *Polizeiwissenschaft*.” It is a point easily confirmed by the never-quite-explained paradox enlisted by neoconservative pundits who at once clamor for minimal government regulation in all areas of the economy but reserve this regulatory function for social morality — think of Newt Gingrich’s Republicans, or Preston Manning’s Reform Party. But this is to state the obvious. For Hardt and Negri, the more crucial question is what forms of cooperation and antagonism *are* possible now that civil society, the space of dialogue and contestation that makes socialism possible in the first place, has withered away? How do we turn the strictly cramped freedoms of the free market to our advantage?

The answer is partly given in the final chapter, “Potentialities of a Constituent Power.” The 1917 Revolution, the mass mobilizations in Central Europe in 1956 and 1968, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the collapse of the Soviet Union: in each of these events

social movements expressed their power not via the state apparatus or the state-sanctioned procedures of political participation, but “through absence and refusal, flight and exodus” from them. Hardt and Negri thematically join this rejection of state politics with a movement away from the industrial mode of production to the intellectual and immaterial labour characteristic of postmodern capitalism, where they say “creative subjectivity” has the capacity to shift from capital to the “laboring intelligentsia,” which is not exactly a class of people but a sort of *jeu d’esprit* which links everyone together in a state of resilient solidarity. The emphasis on subjectivity sounds like Hegelian idealism, but their argument is quintessentially Marxist. Standing economic determinism on its head, they flatly state that “the reproduction of social life no longer needs capital.” A bold assertion by any standard, their point is that cooperation and the potential for antagonism still exists but that it is “independent of the organizational capacity of capital; the cooperation and subjectivity of labor have found a point of contact outside the machinations of capital.” This point of contact is a newly constituted form of labour: not the productive labour of the factory worker whose activity is always — to quote Marx from the *Grundrisse* — understood as a “negative state,” but rather as “the positive, creative activity” of human work in all of its applications. This recuperative spin Marx put on the “living, form-giving fire” potential of human labour is what Negri and Hardt call “the labor of Dionysus,” the critical and constructive powers which we use to produce autonomous ways of collective thinking and acting.

Be that as it may, a description of the postmodern state of affairs can not be the end point of political and philosophical thought. Hardt and Negri reveal as much at the end of the chapter in their discussion of violence. Attributing the rise of nonviolent action among postmodernist activists to “the dearth of legitimated forms of political action that has resulted from the withering of civil society,” they put forward the idea that violence is indeed warranted so long as it is not posed as “the means to anything but its own power.” When it affirms its own power — so their logic goes — the violence of a multitude of people is a kind of collective

labour in the tradition of the general strike, an action which is philosophically justified on the assumption that the materialist tradition has always viewed the exertion of power as “the essence of the world.” Pointing out that reformism “is not only impossible, but also boring,” Hardt and Negri conclude that we should avoid the indecisive cerebralism characteristic of so much postmodernist theory and look to the materialist tradition as a terrain where new foundations of thought and political praxis are possible. Revolutionary violence, they seem to be saying, can never be rationalized by an appeal to existing legal and political structures, because these structures are exactly what need to be overturned. It is not just a matter of applauding, as Georges Sorel did, the symbolic function of mass action; rather, it is more important to recognize that, since there is no cognitive or ethical assurance in advance of political action, we are left with accepting responsibility for what we do. Thus Hardt and Negri conclude by saying that we need to “conceive a critique of violence that takes no violence as necessarily acceptable or unacceptable but rather looks to the different forms and instances of violence in our lives to differentiate among them.”

Belligerent postmodernists still enamored with the epistemological skepticism of people like Baudrillard and Lyotard will probably complain that this book is too utopian because it engages with the current state of affairs not in order to wallow in it but in order to offer viable adjustments as to how we might change it. Yet such a conclusion can be arrived at only by forgetting that, even in the verbal universe envisioned in postmodernism, being committed to a decent set of social values still requires a great deal of hope. Other readers may indict Hardt and Negri for inciting indiscriminate rebellion, a conclusion made tempting by the fact that Negri was once imprisoned in Italy on a trumped-up charge of being the brains behind the Red Army's assassination of Prime Minister Aldo Moro in the late 1970s. But this moral road turns on the hallucination that violence — protests, mass strikes, direct actions — are exceptions to the rule rather than constitutive political methods in their own right. University Marxists and others who fancy themselves as grass roots thinkers will criticize Hardt and Negri around

the frequent leftist complaint that theoretical subject-matter only muddles the plain road to direct action. But it is difficult to see how any book which seeks to reorient our thinking about the delicate relations between the state, political praxis, and the possibility of communism can proceed in any way but by minute excavations and sometimes labourious readings. How can such a sustained effort at analytical rigor waged by Hardt and Negri be anything but beneficial to the politics of the present? To be sure, each of the seven chapters in *Labor of Dionysus* is remarkable for its learning, especially its meticulous reading of texts, as well as its combination of theoretical insight with an unmistakable political commitment. And it is precisely on this count that the book is able to offer us an imaginative investigation of new problematics for research and collective praxis in light of what is going on in the world today.

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