

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly*
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Anti-Capitalist Entrepreneurship: Lessons about and for the Multitude

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‘Hardt and Negri’ are familiar names for those interested in contemporary Marxist theory, social movements, and social change.¹ Drawing on the traditions of autonomist Marxism, Italian *operaismo*, Foucauldian and Deleuzian poststructuralism, and Spinozian philosophy, their previous works, *Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth*, advanced a unique reading of contemporary capitalism and the collective subject that could transform it.² While it is not possible to give a full summary of the trilogy here, to provide a basis for the present review of *Assembly*, it is useful to briefly outline the central concepts developed in these books.

Empire develops a reading of contemporary capitalism as a system of decentralised political and economic power, a network-based global ‘empire’ in which capital has subsumed life such that there is no outside point from which it can be apprehended or contested. *Multitude* details the new revolutionary subjectivity that Hardt and Negri argue has immanently emerged from within Empire, a collective subject defined by its capacity for creativity, innovation,

1 I would like to acknowledge the editorial support of Jack Foster for his constructive comments.

2 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (London: Harvard University Press, 2001); *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Penguin, 2004); *Commonwealth* (London: Harvard University Press, 2009).

cooperation, and collective labour. They conceptualise labour in a broad sense, from manual and cognitive skills, to the production of services, affects, cultural products, algorithms, communication, social and scientific knowledge, and care for others, which they call ‘immaterial labour’. In this way, ‘The multitude is a diffuse set of singularities that produce a common life; it is a kind of social flesh that organizes itself into a new social body’.³ Finally, *Commonwealth* details the multitude’s production of ‘the common’ and the attempted enclosure of common wealth by Empire.⁴ For Hardt and Negri, Empire is parasitic, appropriating, privatising, and extracting value from the productive capacities of the multitude. They emphasise the biopolitical nature of production in Empire, something which also leads to the production of new subjectivities.⁵ Hence, the struggle over life (*bio*) and the common (including social and natural wealth) takes the form of biopolitical struggles against the reproduction of capital.

Assembly is the fourth in this series. The authors seek to develop a theory of organisation and leadership in emancipatory social change as articulated by the agency of ‘the multitude’. This builds on the concepts they have developed in the earlier trilogy, and addresses the tensions that collective movements who lack leadership face.⁶ They examine why recent social movements such as Occupy, the Arab Spring, the Spanish *Indignados*, and the Gezi Park protests could not manage to ‘achieve lasting change and create a new, more democratic, and just society’.⁷ Their solution to the

3 Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 349.

4 ‘The common’ should not be confused with the commons, communes, or communities. In Hardt and Negri, the term is used to refer to the common wealth of the material world, which is the outcome of the social production of the multitude. See Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, viii.

5 Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 66

6 This tension between horizontal and vertical organisation has been the subject of a long debate. For alternative views see David Graeber, *The Democracy Project*. (London: Random House, 2013); Neil Sutherland, Christopher Land, and Steffen Böhm, ‘Anti-Leaders (hip) in Social Movement Organizations: The Case of Autonomous Grassroots Groups,’ *Organization* 21, no. 6 (2014): 759–781; Simon Western, ‘Autonomist Leadership in Leaderless Movements: Anarchists Leading the Way,’ *Ephemera* 14, no. 4 (2014): 673–698.

7 Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), xiii.

impasse faced by these movements is an argument for strategic leadership, and a championing of the multitude's 'entrepreneurial' capacity. Considering the association of the latter with the discourse of neoliberal capitalism and a promotion of individualism, many would approach this term with distaste. However, Hardt and Negri purposefully subvert, (re)appropriate, and challenge this term's neoliberal connotations, conceptualising the entrepreneurialism of the multitude as its capacity to develop collective, emancipatory forms of production and political organisation. They suggest an alternative and collective reading of an entrepreneurial multitude which moves toward autonomy and is capable of creating new social relations through cooperation and resource reappropriation (such as the means of production, labour, knowledge(s), and machines). Inspired by the 16th century political philosopher, Niccolò Machiavelli, who famously elaborated how to gain and maintain power in *The Prince*, the authors attempt to conceptualise a new 'Prince', one that promotes freedom, equality, and radical democracy: a new realist political entrepreneur who aims to take power and lead social change toward a non-capitalist future based on the common—'*Assembly*, is meant to grasp the power of coming together and acting politically in concert'.⁸

In the remainder of this review, I provide a brief snapshot of the book. I follow its four-part structure, emphasising, in particular, the discussion of the multitude's political potential. Throughout, I refer to the text's ongoing dialogue of calls and responses back and forth, which can be considered as a set of reminders of the different axis points of social change: wealth, institutions, and organisation.

The first part sets the scene for discussing the problem of leadership. Addressing an issue familiar to activists, Hardt and Negri argue that while leaderless collective movements may defend democratic practices, they are prone to being or becoming ineffective at making concrete demands, and may fall prey to the shadowy and unaccountable machinations of de-facto leadership (as was evident, for instance, in the case of Occupy, and even the Paris Commune). On the other hand, while strong leadership may be effective in some respects, it is problematic democratically. In response to

8 Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*, xxi.

former critiques of horizontalism, then, Hardt and Negri develop a new framing of leadership by turning to the multitude as a possible solution.

For Hardt and Negri, the ‘multitude designates a radical diversity of social subjectivities that do not spontaneously form together but instead require a political project to organise’.⁹ They invert the taken-for-granted roles of movements and leaders, arguing that the development of long-term strategies should come from movements, while short-term and practical tactics should be applied by leaders (first call). Further, they argue for the making common of space. Social movements such as Occupy and Gezi, for instance, ‘made urban space common’ (second call).¹⁰ This challenges sovereign state power and is an example of experimental democratic mechanisms which could potentially lead to the invention of new, non-sovereign institutions. This touches on one of the core arguments of the book: that we need to find ways to ‘wed’ the political and the social, to create non-sovereign political institutions and new democratic organisations (which are significantly different from parliamentary politics and representative democracy) (first response).

Responding to the recent debate on populism, they argue that liberation movements should be antagonistic to ruling powers, democratic but with a sense of structure, and non-identitarian. In this way, the reactionary elements that can define populist movements are avoided. In concluding this section, they argue that the leadership problem can be solved through the movements that are articulated in and by the multitude; the multitude itself is an ontological space where we can locate the ‘accumulation of practices and subjectivity’ and cooperative coalitions we can rely on (second response) to construct a real democracy through taking power in a different way (third call).¹¹

The second part of the book aims to respond to this challenge of transforming power relations from below—that is, from the realm of social production in which the multitude creates cooperative networks and ‘produces and reproduces society itself’, leading to the ‘construction

9 Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*, 69.

10 Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*, 35.

11 Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*, 67.

of alternative social relations'.¹² The authors analyse how the multitude should transform the relations of property, technology, and governance in its capacity as an 'entrepreneur'.

By referring to the immaterial nature of contemporary relations of production, they argue that property relations are already beyond the control of capital. As such, 'property', including the Earth and its ecosystems, immaterial products, material commodities, social territories and social institutions, health services, education, housing, and welfare, should be shared, used, and self-managed democratically, or, in other words, made common (third response). They argue that, as an alternative to private and public ownership, the common can provide economic security, challenge precariatization, and enable the creation of alternative subjectivities. The re-appropriation and communing of fixed capital is of issue here also (fourth call).

Regarding governance, they propose organising from below as a means forward. As the multitude is capable of creating its own governance mechanisms, it should depart from rationally structured forms of bureaucratic organisation, limited as they are by the separation of affect and reason, calculability and measure. This argument is also situated as a response to those who claim that resistance should focus on the capturing and re-appropriation of state power; Hardt and Negri prefer a program in which the state is smashed in the process of struggle (fourth response).

The supposed 'entrepreneurship' of the multitude provides the basis for their discussion of agency (fifth call). By emphasising the autonomous organisation of social cooperation and production around the common, they call for the setting-free of the multitude's potential in the form of 'social unionism', something based on the complementary and mutually constitutive relationship between labour struggles and other social movement traditions that nevertheless goes beyond the limits of union organising. 'Social strike', which disrupts social order and suspends capitalist production, is a key weapon of social unionism and forms a new ground for entrepreneurship.

Part III examines how Empire has responded to the entrepreneurial capacities of the multitude. The authors sketch out an argument that

12 Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*, 78.

neoliberalism was a reactionary movement, aimed at rolling-back and permanently limiting the power of labour following the post-war social compact; they also emphasise how finance has increasingly become a means of political control. The large levels of public debt needed to cover the fiscal deficit generated by neoliberal tax-cuts and capital liberalisation, for instance, have seen the priorities of global financial markets become dominant. Changing social relations of money further reshape the varied forms of production, which, in turn, change the forms of value, class struggle, and political organisation.

Demystifying the promises of neoliberalism, they argue that, under this regime, workers are increasingly ‘free from stable employment, welfare services, [and] state assistance—free to manage their own precarious lives as best they can’.¹³ They also note the manner in which consent to neoliberalism was partially generated through the appropriation and individualisation of progressive demands for freedom, self-management, and work-place autonomy that emerged from the experiments of the entrepreneurship of the multitude during the 1960s.¹⁴ In response to the imposition of market logic over the social and political, they call for the production of new subjectivities that will enable new social relations of resistance to flourish alongside a project to destroy the production of neoliberal individualism (fifth response).

In the book’s final part, Hardt and Negri elaborate on their understanding of the multitude’s agency. They liken it to a new ‘Prince’, emerging ‘like a chemical precipitate that already exists in suspension, dispersed throughout society’ that ‘must take power, but differently, through a radical innovation of democratic institutions and a development of capacities to administer together the common in which social life is written’.¹⁵ This section thus pivots around a discussion of emancipatory strategy and social change.

By referring to the social powers of production, they conceptualise ‘political realism’ as the basis for struggle and organisation; we can,

13 Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*, 210

14 See also, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005).

15 Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*, 228.

they argue, utilise power through the innovative, complementary, and conflicting relationships of the multitude. From there emanate the elements necessary for the organisation of emancipatory social change: struggle, resistance, and antagonism; the common as both the foundation and the program; the entrepreneurship of the multitude; and radical dualism against capitalist institutions and its political command, within and against power. This requires a politicisation of the social strike, producing a “dualism of power”, breaking away from neoliberal governance, and developing practices of counterpower.¹⁶

In terms of wide-scale social transformation, they sketch out three levels of struggle that should be waged simultaneously and complementarily: (i) micro-level, pre-figurative politics, such as the development of communes and cooperatives, with the hope being that such experiments will gradually engage with broader social relations—this is understood as a strategy of ‘exodus’ from the system; (ii) antagonistic reformism within institutions; and (iii) taking power by overthrowing existing institutions, developing hegemony, and swiftly transforming society as a whole.

In closing the book, they welcome the efforts of recent social movements such as Occupy, the Spanish *Indignados*, Black Lives Matter, the Gezi Park protests, and the Arab Spring, as important experiments of the ‘right to’, and ‘freedom of’, assembly, a practice that enables the development of new democratic possibilities and subjectivities. In this current historical moment, Hardt and Negri argue, ‘assembly is becoming a constitutive right . . . a mechanism for composing social alternatives, for taking power differently, through cooperation in social production’.¹⁷

Ultimately, the book is concerned with recognising and establishing new democratic political possibilities, something the authors argue is best achieved through the multitude as a strategic actor. So conceived, the multitude is a figure that emerges in the realm of autonomous social production, is capable of disrupting the extraction of value, re-appropriating its own resources, and making social and material wealth common to all. The multitude is capable of self-governance through non-sovereign means, and of effecting social change from below through the

16 Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*, 245.

17 Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*, 295.

creation of counterpowers.

Regardless, previous criticisms levelled at Hardt and Negri remain valid. Namely, the idea of resistance *within* Empire is problematic—there is a contradiction between their interpretations of Empire as having no outside and yet calling for exodus from the system; and the extent to which we can rely on the multitude as a revolutionary subject.¹⁸ Further, the interweaving of three transformative strategies and their aim to keep open the possibilities for inclusion of different political forms, appears at times to be just another version of horizontalism, to which the importance of the political party, or charismatic leader can be juxtaposed.¹⁹ The work of Jodi Dean, who argues that a new understanding of the party is required to enable collective desires be realised, or Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who argue that it is only through the development of counter-hegemony that democracy can be deepened, offer compelling alternatives.²⁰ Regarding the latter, Hardt and Negri argue that it is only through the (re)organisation of social and immaterial labour from below, free from central authority and traditional leadership, that we can create political structures. For them, the entrepreneurship of the multitude is the political power that is capable of interpreting the structures of oppression, developing effective counterpowers, planning for the future, and organising new social relations.²¹

The book is obviously relevant for those who would like to change society from below in Aotearoa New Zealand. The global nature of capital

18 See Nick Dyer-Witheford, 'Empire, Immaterial Labour, the New Combinations, and the Global Worker,' *Rethinking Marxism* 13, nos. 3–4 (2001): 70–80; Matteo Mandarini, 'Antagonism, Contradiction, Time: Conflict and Organization in Antonio Negri,' *Sociological Review* 53, no. 1 (2005): 192–214; Paul Passavant and Jodi Dean, eds. *Empire's New Clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri* (London: Routledge, 2004).

19 Peter Bloom, 'Cutting Off the King's Head: The Self Disciplining Fantasy of Neoliberal Sovereignty,' *New Formations* 88 (2016): 8–29; Dylan Taylor, *Social Movements and Democracy in the 21st Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

20 Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (London: Verso, 2016); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1984); Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

21 Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*, 279

and its operation through the complex web of finance, continued colonial extractivism, and the state all resonate with the analysis of the authors. The book is a dense but pleasing read, and the justification of the multitude as a new Prince quite convincing. Yet, as always, it is a matter of going beyond theory and entering the murkier terrain of praxis, of finding new ways of retaining power and moving forward to an equitable and just society that creates and shares in the common. It is about bringing together different groups, parties, and movements, who may operate using different strategies, and be marked by various tensions, with the aim of challenging capital and the state while simultaneously suggesting alternatives and creating new subjectivities.²² Struggles and social change have always been a process, and as Hardt and Negri argue, ‘we have not yet seen what is possible when the multitude assembles’; the way forward to assembly therefore appears to be the main challenge before us.²³

22 Ozan Alakavuklar and Andrew Dickson, ‘Social Movements, Resistance and Social Change in Aotearoa/New Zealand: An Intervention for Dialogue, Collaboration, and Synergy,’ *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online* 11, no. 2 (2016): 83–88.

23 Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*, 295.