
Between Schmitt and Foucault: An Interview with Michael Hardt

Transcribed by:

Edwin Kent Morris, Virginia Tech
ekmorris@vt.edu

Interview conducted by:

Stefanie Georgakis, stefieg@vt.edu; Jordan Hill, jordanrh@vt.edu; Robert Kirsch, rekirsch@gmail.com; and Edwin Kent Morris, ekmorris@vt.edu

Introduction

This interview with Dr. Michael Hardt, Professor of Literature and Italian at Duke University and a Professor of Philosophy and Politics at the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, took place on February 23, 2012 in Blacksburg, VA. The interview was based on four prepared in advance questions disclosed to Dr. Hardt prior to his visit. The questions are numbered and presented below for the sake of the flow of the interview and easier reference. The interview was recorded and transcribed by Kent Morris. Michael Hardt was on the Virginia Tech campus as part of the ongoing ASPECT lecture series. Dr. Hardt was kind enough to grant the interview prior to his lecture that took place that evening entitled “What to Do in a Crisis.” Many of the themes he would speak about later that night appeared throughout the following interview.

The Questions:

1. (Robert’s question): Dr. Hardt, could you please clarify the relationship between the material labor in the world of production and immaterial labor as discussed throughout the (*Empire*) trilogy? In casting a wide net to theorize immaterial labor, is there a possibility of losing theoretical potency for the world of production?
2. (Kent’s question): Nation-state sovereignty still matters for many who would comprise the Multitude. An example of this would be the proliferation of wall building. Empire is described as new form of global sovereignty that is “everywhere and nowhere,” yet nation-states (albeit in decline) still persist. Considering this, who is sovereign in Empire? Where does sovereignty reside in the age of Empire?
3. (Stefanie’s question): We are currently witnessing forms of resistance to Empire in both the Occupy Wall Street and the black-block anarchists movements in Greece. Where do you see the multitude in these movements? Does the Multitude constitute reconciliation between these forms of the resistance?
4. (Jordan’s question): In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben deploys Ernest Kantorowicz’s notion of “the colossus.” In *Multitude* you and Negri use the concept of “the golem.” Do you see

any parallels or relationship between these two concepts, particularly in light of the important of Kantorowicz in both of these works?

Michael Hardt (MH): Let me start anecdotally. I remember reading an essay in *Wired* magazine in 1997 or something by Peter Druker, a social economist. The theme of the essay was “Labor no longer matters, its knowledge that produces value.” And I thought: where did that knowledge come from? That was partly thinking about well, how can we think about labor in ways that would expand traditional categories of labor to include other activities that are (and here the argument, claim starts) increasingly central to the capitalist economy. So it was partly together with socialist and feminist theories in which I was trained in as a graduate student about (care work, kid work, unwaged labor in the home) and debates about domestic labor. So putting those two things together, you might say the cognitive and affective side were part about thinking how labor and production has transformed. It’s rather that their center of gravity has transformed, it’s not like any of these things are new. There has always been immaterial aspects to commodities.

Both Tony (Antonio Negri) and I felt that ‘immaterial’ was a bad term for this. It seemed to lead quickly to confusion, for example, whereas we are using ‘primary’ to refer to the product, it gets quickly assumed that the process is immaterial, but of course the kinds of production we are talking about equally involve bodies and minds the way the production of commodities do. And of course most of the pedagogical examples we use of immaterial products have material aspects and such. That doesn’t mean that nothing has changed. That is what we are trying to grasp with this: what has changed and so material is the first thing.

Part of the question here is casting the net wide, and has to do with the fact that I think we participated in a decades long tradition of trying to expand the notion of labor and production which do carry risks with them. I was thinking about various ways of putting together Marx and Freud often in the 1970’s and 80’s French Philosophy, or sometimes socialist and feminist things in the U.S. and U.K trying to expand what counts as labor in various polemical ways. There are many pitfalls about that. But at least the first thing for me is that the alternative seems worse of only talking about labor and production as either that which is done for the wage or in a narrow sense keeping the notion of the factory as the paradigm around which all other production surplus circulates.

OK. I have said enough to start. You guys need to lead me or fill in with some things you have been thinking about.

Robert Kirsch (RK): Well this was my question. As a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) for a few years now I am obsessed with this idea of how we are supposed to get this one big union. So, on the one hand, for me the theoretical problem

can be that in the shift of thinking about immaterial, what happens is we do lose sight of material production. You say you are not doing that of course, but I think something like Baudrillard when he says something like “The world of finance is now this self-valorizing sphere of community.” And for me, to suggest that there is this world that is floating above planet Earth that valorizes capital regardless of what happens on planet Earth, it seems to not tell Wobblies like me what to do to get people to join a labor movement that is supposed to end the wage system. So, on the one hand I am curious about that theoretical ambiguity that can result, and on the other hand, I am concerned about the practical consequences that can for organizing on the ground. One of the things we do is try to expand what counts as labor and who can be included in the movement of course. There seems to be some tension there so that is what I am trying to get into with this idea.

MH: I was just thinking from the tradition of the IWW perspective that one can see the injustices of the mainstream trade union practices of excluding sectors of the labor force and populations as what counts as class or a subject, or more strictly how you can participate in the union. How do you think from the perspective of organizing? What are the ways of broadening the notion of labor and class that allow for the unionization of workers? There are at least two moves that have to be done. The first is that sectors of workers is that of service industries and non-traditional sectors. The second one is that is their any way we can think about the organization of unwaged labor, the unemployed, and the precarious workers? I think these practical questions are very close to the theoretical questions.

RK: Sure, sure...

MH: And so what do you think? Can you either see practices that are already in place and working in that direction, and/or what kinds of things do you imagine in the future?

RK: I will think about that...

MH: It is both the way that union organizing is already transforming and what kinds of things would be necessary in the future to...and it is both, and I'm sorry I am just adding...it's both regarding ways that labor and production have changed and the way unions have to keep up with, but it is also ways that unionizing and certain class politics have been inadequate for the requirements of labor. So what do you think?

RK: I think it is a really difficult thing and I think there is a lot of ambiguity that goes into it. We do want to open up this broader idea of what labor is, but at the same time when someone says, “well what is *that?*” Well it's this (or what it *isn't*) and that becomes really difficult practically to organize for. So there seems that there is potential, but also potential for ambiguity that can be difficult to overcome in terms of organizing.

MH: So when you think about the experience of, for instance the Picateros... I am interested in the theoretical implications of the so-called Picateros in Argentina, a movement of unemployed workers. The idea was that we are unemployed but we need to unionize. So it's unions of the unemployed. And they said, we want to picket, but we don't have a factory. So they picket the city. In some ways, they are saying that is not right. They felt this way in Argentina 10 years ago; some of the unions end up being conservative, in protecting a specific, sometimes relatively privileged sector.

RK: So you might want to rethink how to attack specific sites of sovereignty. It's a difficult process actually...

MH: I agree with you. Another aspect of the "what it is or is not" question is that there are other downsides to it, but just to some generalized debates among feminists in the 80's in the U.K. about domestic labor and whether to call it 'work.' One of the questions or objections was not only is this work too, but is it also productive for capital and that the distinction between production and reproduction? This didn't make sense to them as a distinction between workers. So that there should be rights and power also attributed to these unwaged workers. One of the objections I found fascinating was that many felt that their activities were in many ways degraded by calling it 'work.' Yes, it's work to clean toilets and make dinner. But they do it out of love. It's not...(Stefanie interjects saying "it's not a job"). Although it is. That's the dilemma!

I guess I am only bringing up more difficulties once one extends the notion of work and of production as we do. I think we often do that. These are some of the difficulties, especially practical ones. They are also theoretical difficulties too, maybe the same ones. But the sense you posed the question in terms of the IWW and organizing. I was thinking of the practical difficulties of it. I wish I didn't answer that. All I did was raise more questions!

RK: That's good though...

Kent Morris (KM): Both Stefanie and I want to combine our questions. I am generally interested in what you have to say about *who is sovereign* in Empire? Where does sovereignty reside in the age of Empire, considering your statements about civil wars, but also the notion of declining nation-state sovereignty? In particular, the example I am using here is Wendy Brown's proliferation of walls. Stefanie is interested in how resistance movements, Occupy Wall Street and the Black-block anarchists, are really rebelling against the state. It is the police that are coming down on them...

Stefanie Georgakis (SG): I think to complicate things further and because of the nature of my own work, Wendy Brown's argument about sovereignty as having a "performative

nature” is being played out. And while maybe we can talk about states grabbing on to this waning sovereignty, I think when we see these resistance movements which are seemingly disparate, they are very different. But what gets wheeled out is the police. And it is these traditional forms, the monopoly on violence of the state that we see again. I am interested in seeing how this notion of the declining sovereignty of the nation state fits into the response to these kinds of movements.

MH: I see how they are related. So to start with the simplest thing, I remember a number of debates 10 years ago in which one person would say that there is globalization and therefore nation-states no longer matter. The other person would say that nation-states do matter, so there is no globalization. Clearly what we have to think, from my perspective, are ways in which nation-states and of course, very different nation states, have a great deal of power and even autonomy over their functions, but nevertheless have to increasingly model their rule to larger and sometimes global structures.

One of the really convincing arguments for me about this that I thought brought these together was Saskia Sassen’s *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*. What she is doing is that precisely looking at the ways nation-states, in specific things, economics, ministers, at Davos, have to both reason in terms of national interests, but, at the same time, have to think about the needs and pressures of the global economy. It’s as if the same figures have a divided, not loyalty, but logic.

KM: If I recall correctly the way you put it in *Multitude* it’s as if they are “administrating.”

MH: Yeah. But I think they are “dual administrating.” They are administering both. It’s not that these ministers have forgotten about their home country or that they don’t have any power. But rather that power has been shifting. I would try to put together two things: one is the waning or lessening – waning sounds like it’s going to zero – the lessening power of the nation state, and the other I would say is the transformation of sovereignty.

Now I will come back to a stupid terminological thing that Tony and I were facing when writing *Empire*. We were saying that, if one thinks about sovereignty in conceptual terms as the one who decides, meaning – of course the one who is not just the king, but the one could be the party or it even the nation state as such, a unified centralized decision making capacity.

If sovereignty is that, then what we are proposing as emergent or as a tendency in *Empire* is rather decision-making structures that are not unified and centralized, or at least not in the same way. Rather than having to take place in networks, and here networks among the dominant nation states but also together with the IMF and World Bank and other supranational structures...

KM: To clarify a tendency that has developed...

MH: Is *developing*...I mean, that's the whole problem with *Empire*. Someone presented this to me as trying to explain our book to me.

KM: Because you are touching on Schmittian themes...

SG: But also on Foucauldian themes. Networks of power, etc.

MH: Exactly! *I think we are thinking between Schmitt and Foucault here*, that's excellent. In some ways, we are thinking that Schmitt's notion of sovereignty as the one who decides no longer functions. Does that mean there is no more power? Obviously not. Does that mean that power is everywhere and everyone is equal? Clearly not. How do we think about these diffuse and dispersed form(s) of power and the kinds of domination they enact? So there we are between *The Concept of the Political* and that chapter in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* about power. I definitely think that is where we are thinking. And so we could ask should we no longer call that sovereignty because it is no longer centralized and unified in its decision-making? Or should we, and what we ended up doing, say that it is a new form of sovereignty or that sovereignty is becoming something different. It doesn't mean that it is no longer domination, it means rather it is a non-homogenous and non-unified decision making apparatus or something like that. But I would not claim to know precisely how it works. Still, it seems to me that this is what or how people who are more competent than us like Sassen, I think, often work out very specific ways of thinking about how those types of things work, not the whole thing, but the way certain decisions are made by the intersections of different actors. I am still only on your first question.

SG: And that's fine. I can live with that...

KM: I have one more thing to add. In *Multitude* you claim that the state of exception is permanent. Can you fit that into the previous response?

MH: That might be hard. There were plenty of contradictions, and I could give you more. I would say it wasn't meant to say the state of exception was permanent, in many ways it has become a banality today. To say that the state of exception is permanent means that there is no system of right, no legal structure that is capable itself of governing, but rather that powers that are inside and outside the law are ruling. I am a little displeased with that concept though. In *Commonwealth*, we did think of it as a self-critique that all this sovereignty talk really distracted us from the way power works everyday and in its most important functioning.

Rather than looking at things within the law and things that line of thinking that function normally within capital, rather than focusing on things like Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib and the spectacular demonstrations of those things that are outside...So that, I guess, that could function, then, partially as a self-critique. We are not the only ones talking about sovereignty, obviously. It had been a decade of a lot of people talking interestingly about sovereignty. Giorgio Agamben is obvious in that regard. With his focus on the state of exception, well he is perfectly right. I am not saying that Giorgio Agamben is wrong or that it was incorrect to write that. I am thinking about the usefulness of certain scholarly trends

KM: All right...

MH: So then we come to, in a way, the opposition to that...

SG: Yeah because it seems to me that in order for this concept of the Multitude to succeed and particularly in the way it has been formulated, there has to be some reconciliation or meeting point between what's happening, you know, in New York and what is happening in Athens. But it is not clear to me how we could go about doing that?

Jordan Hill (JH): You should maybe say something about why we chose those two examples, because of the differences between them...

MH: But we could add Tahrir Square, which is much different in some ways. Let me start on the finer scale...because at least the way I understand it as a large-scale question about global or transnational connections. To start with Tahrir Square, one of the things I found remarkable, and I am sensitive to this, during those 18 days of the occupation of Tahrir Square, the New York Times and all the foreign press reporters were desperate each day to find a leader. What they couldn't accept or understand was that there wasn't a centralized decision making process. That doesn't mean there was anarchy in the square, if by anarchy one means disorganization and no structures. Rather, there were complex structures of collective decision making that were in reality decentered and horizontally organized. And so, if the New York Times could have been able to think in terms of multitude, perhaps they would have maybe had a better understanding of what was going on there. In terms of I multitude, I don't care about the term – it is not the term that matters...there are plenty of other terms for decentered collective action. Horizontal works for me if the metaphor works for you, that is, horizontal collective decision making. The decision-making is what means the most to me here.

Let's think about what occurred in 2011 and then work back to the more general conceptual question. The way I conceive it, this is in line with a certain intellectual tradition of thinking about cycles of struggle. A cycle of struggle is formed not through repetition. Rather, it is formed through a kind of inspiration and translation that is always related to

local conditions. So classical applications of this kind of phenomenon, for example, slave revolts in the Caribbean, in Brazil, even to Virginia, these always spread. They spread by sailors, stories, and they are often adopted in each other's tactics, adopted the thought and even the recognition process; in the sense that 'they did it, so we can do it too' – and then each group transforms it all. The conditions will be different even if they are all slave relations.

I think that this is a similar thing that happened in 2011 in Tunisia which is quite clear and didn't seem to take that much conceptual work for people moving from Tunisia to Egypt, that, for instance, Mubarak must go, and in relatively similar social circumstances, with linguistic and religious similarities.

The next move to Madrid in May seems like a much bigger leap. Then, of course in Athens, Israel, and then Wall Street, then more or less everywhere. It is quite clear that the social conditions that the rebellions were facing in Cairo and Madrid were very different. But I guess that the first step for me is to recognize that the people conducting the rebels were thinking they were taking the baton for others. Like in Madrid, they thought of it as a continuation or something inspired by Tahrir Square. Some of the people who were the first campers of Zucotti Park had been to Tunisia during the summer, and they thought of what they were doing as related to Athens, Cairo, Madrid these movements end to all those that came before.

So these movements do a kind of translation, like translating the struggle against the tyrant into the struggle against the tyranny of finance. But of course you can recognize all the same methods of encampment, decentralized assemblies, decision-making, and even the structures of what the Spanish call 'commissions' or 'working groups' in the Occupy movement. So it is both a sharing of tactics, slogans, but also I would also say about a contagion of desires.

Here is one other one that was real useful for me, and now I am ruining what I am going to say later on today in the lecture I am going to present. In Madrid, as in many other places this year, a lot of the activists that started the encampment were not experienced militants or activists. They were completely new to politics. They were very young. So when a large portion of them wanted to have the slogan of the day, for the 15th of May last year, 'real democracy now', the experienced militants thought, "oh my god." They were all cynical, leftist enough to know that democracy is totally corrupt. But the inspiration of Egypt was present in a way that put democracy on the agenda and I think allowed for what seems to be a super productive kind of night and day. And I think the circulation of the concept of democracy throughout 2011 is in many ways thanks to the work done and the inspiration done by the North African revolts. In fact, the assumption being from the outside they are not revolting against the tyrants, but to get elections like we got in Spain. Rather it was about assuming that there is a renewed potential of the concept of democracy and that it could be practiced in assemblies and that we could

invent forms of participation, so that the Spaniards quickly translated that into a refusal of representation, 'you don't represent me' and that went with the slogan 'real democracy now.' Which is a transformation of what the commonplace or mediatized version of what democracy is today.

So why did I go through this whole business about what I see as the formation of a cycle of struggle in 2011? The way that it functions is that these are extremely, deeply rooted in local issues but at the same time are able to extend spatially, transnationally through a process that seems best thought of as a contagion or passage of inspiration. If someone were good a medieval thought there would be some way of thinking 'inspiration' better than I could.

JH: Something in this conversation I didn't get out of *Multitude*, but that I think is important, is that you mentioned that in each one of these events is that the media had to come in and translate and spread the word for those that are not in Madrid, Tahrir Square, in Zucotti Park, or wherever. Based upon that, you put that *Multitude* is theoretical, that the idea of multitude is actually a theoretical frame from which we saw all the multinational media things is go back to old frames of sovereignty and power, asking "where's the leader?" And so, theoretically speaking, this idea regardless of what we call it – we will call it 'multitude' because that's your book – actually provides a frame for structures of power that currently exist that don't seem to be able to understand, translate, and communicate what's going on. And that is exactly what you laid out in the beginning of the book (*Multitude*) in that sense...

MH: That's exactly right. And what you say raises a question that I don't know how to think through or formulate what Tony and I are doing. There is a little compensatory instinct in what I am about to say: what we are doing is we are learning from the movements and in some ways saying back to them what they are doing. This gives a passive or reactive version of our intellectual work, because we are just trying to figure out what they are doing and sometimes we try give a name to it, sometimes we give a description of it. I do think it is definitely partly that, and it is important to recognize how much theoretical innovation goes on in these collective experiences, these movements. It is certainly not a matter of theory versus practice: it's a kind of theory that is done in practical framework, or something like that. So what we are calling multitude...is not like we read Spinoza or some 17th century English guys and said 'you all should try this.' It's rather that we are trying to understand what we see going on and trying to find names for it.

JH: We need a new discourse to talk about the things that are going on because the old concepts cannot hold anymore.

MH: That's definitely right. Sometimes it involves trying to renew old concepts that have been corrupted; democracy for instance. Sometimes it's about bringing in relatively new,

or really old concepts, like multitude, but in a way that bring a sort of new dimension to them. I think a certain kind of political theorizing works better. I am generally in favor of struggling over the existing concepts, but sometimes it seems not possible maybe for lack of imagination. For Tony and I the term ‘multitude’ seemed really productive. In fact the more we researched on the tradition and use of it...the 17th century debates that were going on about it in Holland and England seemed to help us have a better understanding of it.

SG: And that’s really what I am trying to get at here too. I am fixated still, always on this notion of sovereignty and where it lies. And if we can ever argue that sovereignty has ever been this hierarchical, centralized thing...

MH: You might be right. Going back to something I said 20 minutes ago, maybe it was wrong what I said. Tony and I claim, even in *Empire*, that there is a shift in sovereignty away from the centralized and unified decision-making capacity, so maybe it was never was that way. That there was this fiction of the king, the Fuehrer, that even Schmitt was imagining or yearning for in his case, for the one who decides, but that there maybe never has been one who decided. I would love that if that were true.

SG: I don’t obviously have an answer, but it seems to me that the notion of sovereignty needs to be problematized more. The notion that there was once a sovereign that is vertical, and that power, as you know, is very hierarchical...

MH: Right. I guess what would be fun. And this would be the kind of thing that I could imagine Foucault doing or would do. It could be from our perspective that we could now re-read historical formations in a way that couldn’t be done previously and see now, in fact, they were never as centralized or unified as they thought and that they always evolved. I think we wrote something about this in *Multitude*.

I was thinking about the history of political theory. How in early modern political theory the social body was always analogous to the human body. And that, in part like in Hobbes for instance, that analogy fortified the hierarchical class or caste system but also the centrality of decision-making, for example, the fact that the brain is one and the head is one – all is one. Well that corresponded to early modern physiology, what science knew at the time. So now, when we start thinking about contemporary neuroscience that tells us that there is really is no center to the brain. All there are networks in the brain. And that decision happens in a decentralized and plural fashion. So then if we were to do that now, that would give us a different view of society. In some ways there is a certain kind of shifting episteme.

JH: And this is cross disciplinary too. Take neuroscience for instance, and looking at what its doing now, how it works cross-disciplinary. For example, Buddhist monastic practices. Some of are looking at these kind of things and are finding that for most peo-

