

Hardt and Negri: Anarchists or (Post) Marxists?

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Introductory remarks

This paper considers Hardt and Negri's thought primarily in light of classical Marxist and anarchist thought, as well as the post-structuralism of Foucault. The paper begins by making some critical observations on the classical Marxist and anarchist view(s) of politics, power and the state, before considering Hardt and Negri's thought – particularly their adaptation of the Foucauldian notion of biopower - as a departure from the 'modernist assumptions' therein. The second part of the paper is concerned with revolutionary subjectivity and 'agency'. Comparison is made of Marx's argument concerning proletarian self- emancipation, and his derisory view of the lumpenproletariat, and in particular Bakunin's view that the 'lumpenproletariat' were a more likely and effective revolutionary grouping than the industrially 'advanced' working classes. Critical attention is given to Hardt and Negri's embrace of the revolutionary potential of the 'lumpenproletariat' in the period of Empire. Can such disadvantaged groupings really be regarded as effective agents of revolution? This critical discussion will be carried out in the context of a wider discussion of Hardt and Negri's conception of the 'multitude'. Moreover, the paper will assess whether the notion of 'refusal' which Hardt and Negri use in the place of 'strategy' can be regarded as in any sense and 'advance'. The paper concludes with a brief assessment of whether Hardt and Negri are anarchists or Marxists, and indeed whether these labels really have any purchase in light of contemporary 'global' political realities.

Classical Marxism and anarchism: Bakunin vs. Marx

In this section, I explore some central differences between classical Marxist and anarchist accounts of power, politics and the state – specifically as they relate to the wider concerns of this paper.

The 'new class' theorist Alvin Gouldner (1982), in a well known article on Marx's battle with Bakunin in the First International puts forward a view of Marx's understanding of the state that is all too popular in a great deal of the literature. Gouldner maintains that Marx's "historical materialism"... is a form of synchronic economic determinism.' (Gouldner, 1982: p. 862) Gouldner goes on to insist that: 'In this, the mode of production, including the forces of production and the contradictions between them, determine the superstructure of ideological and political systems...' (Gouldner, 1982: p. 862) Furthermore, Gouldner writes: 'In Marx's view... power and the political are not governing but governed... Marx... theorizes power as a means to other ends, rather than also an end in itself.' (Gouldner, 1982: p. 862)

It is interesting to note that Gouldner's account of the base-superstructure model is not dissimilar to the one put forward only four years earlier by G.A. Cohen, though Gouldner's account is critical and Cohen's defensive. The classic statement of 'economic determinism' is of course the *1859 Preface*; for an initial reading of that text provides all the ammunition supporters of the deterministic reading of Marx require. So, to quote that passage:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real basis, on which rises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. (Marx, cited in Cohen, 1978)

For Gouldner, the anarchist account of power, politics and the state is more satisfactory, containing as it does an understanding of power which does not consider it simply an effect of economic relations. Here he cites Bakunin favourably:

Political power and wealth are inseparable. Those who have power have the means to gain wealth and must center all their efforts upon acquiring it, for without it they will not be able to retain their power. Those who are wealthy must become strong, for, lacking power, they run the risk of being deprived of their wealth. (Bakunin, cited in Gouldner, 1982: p. 862)

According to this view – it would seem - the relationship between political power and economic power is entirely reciprocal. Indeed, Gouldner maintains that 'Bakunin's views resonate the Hegelian dialectic...' (Gouldner, 1982: p. 862) And he goes on 'In Bakunin's view, power contaminates everyone... No one can be trusted with it.' (Gouldner, 1982: p. 862)

A few points of criticism need to be raised here. First, In relation to Bakunin's argument, and specifically Gouldner's enthusiastic reading of it – Bakunin's account of politics, power and the state is far from dialectical. That is, he provides a reified understanding of power, stripped of a meaningful understanding of its political economy. Thus Bakunin writes:

The State has always been the patrimony of some privileged class or other; a priestly class, an aristocratic class, a bourgeois class... but it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of the State that there should be some privileged class or other which is interested in its existence. (Bakunin, 1990: p. 32)

Accordingly there is at least something of merit in Engels' 1872 letter to Theodore Cuno, where Engels writes:

Bakunin maintains that it is the state which has created capital, that the capitalist has his capital only by the grace of the state. As, therefore, the state is the chief evil, it is above all the state which must be done away with and then capitalism will go to blazes of itself. (Engels, to Cuno, 1872: p. 257)

We can see this elsewhere in Bakunin (and indeed Proudhon's work) where political power and the state are regarded simply as an evil (which as Gouldner just maintained 'no one can be trusted' with). Thus, Bakunin writes that: 'The State, being the supreme objective, everything that is favourable to the development of its power is good; all that is contrary to it... is bad.' (Bakunin, 1990: p. 30) The state is necessarily authoritarian for Bakunin. And Proudhon writes that: 'To be governed is to be at every operation, at every transaction, noted, registered, enrolled, taxed, stamped, measured, numbered, assessed, licensed, authorized, admonished, forbidden, reformed, corrected, punished.' And he goes on, concluding that 'That is government; that is justice; that is morality.' (Proudhon, cited in Miller, 1984: p. 6) Bakunin goes on to write of how all states are founded on principles of 'authority', in which the masses are considered as 'incapable of governing themselves'. They must he says always give themselves over to the 'yoke of wisdom' 'imposed from above.' (Bakunin, 1990: p. 33)

Second, there is at least an alternative to the determinist account of Marx's view of the relationship between economic power and the state, grounded in Marx and Engels' concrete political analyses. If in the *Communist Manifesto*: 'The executive of the modern [i.e. capitalist] state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie' (Marx and Engels, 2000a: p. 223, then there is at least the acknowledgement that, given the internal divisions of the bourgeoisie, such a common committee is required. Individual members of the bourgeoisie, and capital(s) left to their own devices are incapable of representing their common collective interests, blinded as they will be by the immediacy of the economic struggle. Poulantzas makes this point in his structuralist analysis of the capitalist state, when he maintains that the 'capitalist' state is more effective when the members of the capitalist class 'do not participate in the state apparatuses'. (Poulantzas, 1972: p. 246) This is the well know argument of relative autonomy, an argument set out by Marx in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*; here Marx shows how it was possible for the 'lumpenproletarian' Bonaparte to assume dictatorial leadership over and above the divided French bourgeoisie. Marx here provided a materially grounded understanding of relative autonomy, analysing the interaction of class forces, and showing how the appearance of complete autonomy was deceptive – for Marx noted, 'the state power is not suspended in mid-air. Bonaparte represents a class, and he most numerous class of French society at that, the small holding peasantry.' (Marx, 1968: p. 163)

Furthermore, it must be pointed out that Marx provides a dialectical account of the relationship between the economic and the political. (Here I resist Cohen's claim that dialectical Marxism is 'bullshit Marxism.') See Ollman, 1976; Sayer, 1987) among others have argued cogently that Marx's approach can best be regarded as guided by an 'internal relations' understanding. The very concept of a mode of production implies that there is a relationship between technological forces, relations of production, and the state form, such that class rule cannot carry on without an appropriate state relation. However, just as 'men make history but not in circumstances of their choosing', economic relations create the conditions of possibility for state forms, and state forms allow for the continued development of relations of production, and ultimately productive forces (or act as fetters).

The critical remarks above may go some of the way to demonstrate that if Bakunin was no dialectician, Marx was no determinist. But this discussion of relative

autonomy is also of wider importance for our understanding of the of the Marxism-anarchism debate at the level of ‘strategy’. For if the state can (as a result of the complex over-determination of productive and class forces) assume the sort of relative autonomy from the economically dominant class (or classes) which Marx’s political analysis of Bonapartism suggests, then we are at least presented with the possibility of certain apparatuses of the state in capitalist society being transformed for progressive (revolutionary) purposes, once that is its property basis has been fully interrogated – for as Marx writes ‘when the class rule has disappeared, there will no longer be any state in the present sense of the word.’ (Marx, 2000: p. 608)

From Foucault to Hardt and Negri

I have maintained so far that the Marxian account of the state is not necessarily one that considers the state form as merely epiphenomenal – Marx and Engels at least considered that state forms have a definite economic basis, though the actual relationship between the economic and the political could only be ascertained as a result of concrete historical investigation. The classical anarchist account on the other hand has a reified view of the state as evil, and indeed all authority – scientific as well as political – as pernicious.

Now, leaving comparing the relative merits of each of these approaches, it can at least be maintained that we live in a quite different world to that of Bakunin and Marx occupied. The state is no longer what it once was. Capitalism has undergone a process of dramatic transformation – we now have a global capitalism, where the nation state (or ‘the state’) no longer ‘rule’. Our general subservience to authority – including the authority of ‘science’ - has been dramatically eroded. Material economic relations – in the sense which Marx wrote of them – can no longer be regarded as causally determinant. Power is no longer linear, it is multifaceted. Power is not something which pre-constituted individuals resist, but rather constitutes individuals as subjects (much as ideology did for Althusser, 1965). This of course is the type of focus of much contemporary post-structuralism. Foucault for example has challenged the Marxist account, writing that:

Marx’s economic discourse comes under the rules of formation of scientific discourses that were peculiar to the nineteenth century... Marxist economics – though its basic concepts and the general rules of discourse – belongs to a type of discursive formation that was defined around the time of Ricardo. (Foucault, cited in Olssen, 2004: p. 454)

Resisting the univocal conception of power, and the artificial separation of economic and political power, Foucault wrote in *The History of Sexuality* that:

Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationship (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter; they are the immediate effects of the divisions, inequalities and disequilibriums which occur in the latter, and conversely they are the internal conditions of these differentiations. (Foucault, 1979, p. 94)

Used as a line of critique against Marx at least, Foucault can be challenged. Marx, as we have seen earlier did not hold to such an external relations account of the relationship between forms of power. And Foucault's general approach to power has been regarded by some as an anarchist, or indeed 'post-anarchist' one. (See Call, 2002; Simpson, 1994, and indeed Hardt and Negri, 1995.) On the other hand, Foucault has been criticised by Rorty as overly metaphysical. (See Rorty, 1989) And challenged by Taylor (1986) as both over-simplistic, and as undermining any possibility of a radical politics of resistance. What is clear is that when considering resistance, Foucault is concerned more with micro-processes than with macro-processes; there is no meta-narrative of resistance like we find in either the classical Marxists or anarchist (though there is at least an opposition to the revolutionary 'authority' of revolutionary science, not unlike that found in the work of key anarchist thinkers). Of resistance, Foucault writes: 'Just as the network of power relations ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localised in them, so too the swarm of points of resistance traverses social stratifications and individual unities.' (Foucault, cited in Rouse, 1994, p. 109)

And this leads us back to the work of Hardt and Negri. For, in Hardt and Negri's work we see we see an incorporation/synthesis of anarchistic and broadly Marxian elements within a framework influenced greatly by post-structuralist (see Rustin, 2003) thought, particularly of Foucault.

To begin with, however, we might note that Hardt and Negri reject the view of those who consider them to be anarchists. For example, Negri writes: 'It is a pity that the anarchist conception has never been attentive to the issue of homology with the state... so that it produces in its concept of insurrection and in that of the abolition of the state a revolutionary imprint that is fiercely empty of alternative proposals and full of resentment.' (Negri, 2008: pp. 144-145) Earlier in the same text, Negri criticises the anarchists for refusing 'to define a time or space as privileged moments of uprising; they live in the chaos of the world of exploitation, illustrating destructively its institutions', but failing to put forward a positive strategy of transformation.' (Negri, 2008: p. 144) Rather, Hardt and Negri explicitly affirm themselves as 'communists'. Now, as a sketchy critique of anarchism, it strikes me that Negri is at least on to something here. Bakunin does after all write that the 'urge to destroy' is a 'creative urge'. Foucault's approach at times seems nihilistic. And the contemporary anarchist and anti-capitalist John Holloway refuses to prioritise specific sites of struggle – indeed, opposes the very idea of 'strategy'. (See Holloway, 2002.)

Let us look at some key features of Hardt and Negri's analysis. To begin with, it should be pointed out that Hardt and Negri as with Foucault reject the idea of the state as sovereign, that is as the key apparatus charged with the exercise of (political) power in contemporary society. But they also reject (at least in its 'traditional' Marxian sense) the idea that the political state can be considered as an expression of bourgeois class interests, even if presumably the state is understood as relatively autonomous. The realities of globalisation have necessitated that we go beyond such positions. Thus, in *Empire*, they write: 'The passage to Empire emerges from the twilight of modern sovereignty... It is a decentred and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers.' (Hardt and Negri, 2000, pp. xii-xiii) The modernist understanding of 'sovereignty', the 'nation state', the 'people' comes to be challenged. Thus he insists:

‘Today, on the contrary, it is the crisis of the nation state as induced by globalisation that the general crisis of political categories of modernity manifests, opening thought to the relation between Empire and multitudes.’ (Negri, 2006: p. 22)

If classical anarchists and Marxists alike remain trapped inside a ‘modernist’ problematic which considers power only in relation to its univocal exercise, then Hardt and Negri adopt/adapt the Foucauldian – and post-anarchist -language of biopower to the cause of radical politics in what they consider to be a context of post modernity. Of biopower, the authors write that: ‘Biopower is a form of power that regulates social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it, and rearticulating it.’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 24) This is in many ways the irony of post-modern analyses of – that is power is decentred, multi-vocal, but also more totalising than it has ever been; Empire subjugates more than imperialism ever could.

With the classical Marxists and anarchists one can see a clear discourse of resistance such that the exercise of power is never full. But what of a radical politics in this age of Empire? Here, drawing on Foucault, Hardt and Negri have developed a powerful argument in favour of a biopolitics of resistance. Of biopolitics, the authors write that biopower always ‘meets with resistance.’ (Hardt and Negri, 2005: p. 55) Hardt and Negri write that:

The suicide bomber appears here... as a symbol of the inevitable limitation and vulnerability of sovereign power, refusing to accept a life of submission, the suicide bomber turns life itself into a horrible weapon. This is the ontological limit of biopower in its most tragic and revolting form. (Hardt and Negri, 2005: p. 54)

And they continue by insisting that: ‘Such destruction only grasps the passive, negative limit of sovereign power. The positive, active limit is revealed most clearly with respect to labour and social production.’ (Hardt and Negri, 2005: p. 54) But this does not really provide us with an adequate definition of biopolitics. Biopolitics for Hardt and Negri is a politics of constructive resistance. It rallies against the exploitive totalisation of the contemporary capital form. It seeks to reincorporate a form of production which resists the imposition of the rule of ‘measure’ – a form of communal production against Empire. Here Hardt and Negri draw a useful distinction between ‘constituent’ and ‘constitutional’ power. The former is ‘an institutional form that develops a common content; it is a development of force that defends the historical progression of emancipation and liberation; it is, in short, an act of love.’ (Hardt and Negri, 2005: p. 351) The later on the other hand, seeks to constrain, to subjugate, to legalise. And constituent power is exercised through ‘multiplicity’, a multiplicity of the multitude. Just as there is no one site of Empire, there is no one site of (constructive) resistance to Empire. Just as Empire can be considered a totalising mode of exploitation, so too resistance is everywhere. The Leninist party (and in his early work, Negri at least was rather enthusiastic about the Party) can no longer represent a unitary site of struggle. The working class are just one exploited group amongst many. We are all the proletariat. The proletariat are the multitude.

If one fundamental rupture between classical Marxist and anarchist approaches pertains to organisational questions, then the idea of biopolitics as resistance in the domain of biopower brings these issues to the fore in the contemporary context. Perhaps in a way situating themselves against a more traditional Marxist approach, Hardt and Negri write: ‘In the paradigm of immaterial

labor... as production becomes increasingly biopolitical... an isolation of economic issues makes less and less sense.’(Hardt and Negri, 2005: p. 136) A revolutionary ‘strategy’ must presumably be levelled against the social bios as a whole – and not at ‘the economy’ (in the limited sense) or ‘the state’ – exploitation must be attacked in all its differential manifestations, from the exploitation of emotion (affect), ‘immaterial labour’, the exploitation of sexuality, to the exploitation of good old fashioned manual labour. But this for Hardt and Negri is a positive attack. So, in *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri write: ‘We need to create weapons that are not merely destructive but are themselves forms of constituent power, weapons capable of constructing democracy and defeating the armies of Empire.’ (Hardt and Negri, 2005: p. 347) And they continue in a somewhat utopian fashion, by maintaining that: ‘It is not unreasonable to hope that in a biopolitical future (after the defeat of biopower) war will no longer be possible, and the intensity of the cooperation and communication among singularities (workers and/or citizens) will destroy its possibility.’ (Hardt and Negri, 2005: p. 347)

Revolutionary subjectivity, agency and emancipation

If on the issues of the state, power and politics the lines between the classical Marxists and anarchists were pretty much drawn, then so too with this issue. To even attempt to characterise this debate is to start from an ideological position. For Bakunin and for Proudhon, Marxism has, from its very start, been an elitist doctrine. Of course, this view was the result not so much of theoretical reflection but of practical personal experience; in particular, for Bakunin, the behaviour of Marx in the First International. So too, for Marx, Bakunin was considered an elitist conspirator, and Marx had a great deal of empirical evidence to support his belief. Now, if not always in his personal actions, at least in his writings, Marx states the importance of proletarian self-emancipation, in a way which for example sets him apart from later authoritarian versions of Marxism-Leninism. If for Lenin, the workers left to their own devices would not be able to develop a truly political form of revolutionary consciousness, there were no such explicit doubts regarding the revolutionary capacities of the workers in Marx’s writings. The principle of proletarian self-emancipation is central to the Marxian view of revolution. (See Draper, 1971) No where is this stated more explicitly than by Marx and Engels in the *Circular Letter* of 1879, where they write that ‘The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.’ (Marx and Engels, *Circular Letter* of 1879, p. 622)

Yet it is true that the ideological importance attributed to proletarian self-emancipation is challenged by the fetishised operations of the capitalist economic system (a point brought out particularly well in an article by Carol Johnson, 1980). How can alienated workers see through the opacity of the division of labour, so as to throw off the shackles of capitalist exploitation? The stock answer to this question is that they cannot, and therefore the role that Marx attributed to his science was outside the workers – Marx’s support for the principle of self-emancipation is therefore, in essence, a sham. This was definitely how Bakunin thought about the issue -and so too Proudhon. Bakunin wrote:

It will be the reign of scientific intelligence, the most aristocratic, despotic, arrogant, and contemptuous of all regimes. There will be a new class, a new

hierarchy of real and pretended scientists and scholars, and the world will be divided into a minority ruling in the name of knowledge and an immense ignorant majority. And then, woe betide the mass of ignorant ones. (Bakunin, 1990: p. 38)

Whatever our interpretation of the relationship between proletarian agency and revolutionary science in Marx's thought, we need to recall that he had a very precise understanding of who the revolutionary proletariat were – the revolutionary proletariat were exploited wage-labourers (and predominantly, those of the most advanced industrial sectors). And here we again find a fault line between the Marxian and classical revolutionary anarchist view. Where for Marx, the internal dialectic of the (advanced) capitalist labour process results not only in relations of fragmentation, but also relations of communal solidarity, Bakunin seems to see nothing progressive with such workers. Accordingly, he wrote of how

with its relative comfort and semi-bourgeois position, this upper layer of workers is unfortunately only too deeply penetrated with all the political and social prejudices and all the narrow aspirations and pretensions of the bourgeoisie. It can be truly said that this upper layer is the least socialist, the most individualist in all the proletariat. (Bakunin, 1990: p. 47)

And here there is no clearer dividing line between the classical anarchist and Marxian account of revolutionary agency – for Bakunin turned his back on the industrially 'advanced' proletariat, and instead embraced the 'lumpenproletariat', who he considers the 'flower' of the proletariat. 'By the flower of the proletariat I mean precisely that eternal "meat" for governments, that great rabble of people ordinarily designated by Messrs. Marx and Engels by the phrase at once picturesque and contemptuous of "lumpenproletariat".' (Bakunin, 1990: p 48)

Bakunin is correct that Marx's (and indeed Engels') view of the lumpenproletariat is contemptuous. We can find a range of passages where Marx gives views that would not look out of place if they came out of the mouth of a contemporary *Daily Mail* reader. In the *Preface to the Second Edition of the Peasant War in Germany* (1870), Engels wrote: 'The *lumpenproletariat*, this scum of depraved element from all classes, with headquarters in the big cities, is the worst of all possible allies. This rabble is absolutely venal and absolutely brazen.' (Engels, 1968: p. 229) And in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx referred to the lumpenproletariat as 'the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the layers of old society.' (Marx and Engels, 2000a: p. 254) Yet, the defining features of the lumpenproletariat were ambiguous.

Where for Bakunin, they were the most exploited sections of the proletariat, for Marx, key aspects of the lumpenproletariat sat outside the (directly) exploitative mechanisms of the capitalist system. They were the parasitic groupings. They were the reactionary forces likely set back the historical cause of the proletariat – and indeed, the cause of historical progress in general. But they were more than (permanently) unemployed workers. They were the 'organ grinders', the 'criminals', the 'prostitutes'. Marx even discusses the finance aristocracy in this context, writing that 'where money, filth and blood commingle. The finance aristocracy, in its mode of acquisition as well as in its pleasures, is nothing but the rebirth of the lumpenproletariat on the heights of bourgeois society.' (Marx, cited in Hayes: p. 449) The lumpenproletariat exist outside of the binary opposition between exploiter and

exploited, conceived as the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. They were the class that was not a class, to the extent that, as Hayes has noted: ‘They were a class only in so far as they were lumped together by their last contact with the dialectic, their common exclusion from the relations of production.’ (Hayes, 1988: p. 447)

A few words about the relative merits of each of these approaches. First, while we could insist that history has not been particularly favourable to the Marxian account of the revolutionary proletariat, Marx does at least provide a rigorous philosophical and historically situated account of the revolutionary potential of the proletariat, grounded in an understanding of class interests and capacities, and usable for future research. In Bakunin, we have more in the way of utopian revolutionary aspiration. And if we look at the history of the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, Bakunin’s ‘flower’ of the proletariat has indeed fed into the ranks not of the revolutionary cause of the left, but the reactionary cause of the right; their exclusion from the productive process means that they frequently lack those mechanisms of solidarity necessary for generating common class action – indeed, to echo what has been said above, they are in part incapable of self-representation because there is no self for them to represent. Moreover, they are not bound up in any sense with an idea of a progressive historical future. Their identity is configured purely in a negative fashion.

Second, it is important to challenge Marx’s *Daily Mail* account of the lumpenproletariat. Marx is concerned to create a line of demarcation between what we might refer to as the ‘reserve army of labour’, who can be regarded as part of the proletariat, to the extent that they are always already potential workers, and those always already outside the productive process. But this distinction relies on a form of moral(ising) discourse which does not fit so well with Marx’s social scientific analysis elsewhere. Moreover, it underestimates the desire of the ‘permanently’ excluded to enter the ranks of wage labour. (For a contemporary analysis of this issue, see Byrne, 1999; Nelson, 1985; Wilson, 1987) In short, we cannot regard the boundaries of the proletariat and the ‘Other’ of the lumpenproletariat as clearly as Marx would sometimes wish us to believe. (See Stalybrass, 1990.)

And this brings us back to Hardt and Negri, and specifically their concept of the multitude. For if neither of the above accounts of revolutionary agency were particularly satisfactory in their own historical context, then for Hardt and Negri at least, we need to reconceptualise the notion of revolutionary agency in a way suitable for the realities of contemporary informationalized global capitalism – the period of Empire. (And I think that in some ways, for Hardt and Negri, this means bringing together the Anarchist and Marxist accounts, though in other ways departing from both.) Let us look at Hardt and Negri’s conception of the multitude.

It is worth reflecting briefly on what Hardt and Negri say on what we might consider to be the more traditional account of Marxian revolutionary agency. The authors write that the:

industrial working class was often accorded the leading role over other figures of labor (such as peasant labour and reproductive labor) in both economic analyses and political movement. Today that working class has all but disappeared from view. It has not ceased to exist but has been displaced from

its privileged position in the capitalist economy and its hegemonic position in the class composition of the proletariat. (Hardt and Negri, 2000: p. 53)

Thus there is a need to say farewell to the old working class, and hello to the new proletariat. The ontology on which Marx's understanding of the proletariat was grounded is reconfigured. Hardt and Negri's use of the concept of the multitude is an attempt to achieve this. But who are the multitude? Both Bakunin and Marx attributed an ontological privilege to particular groups in relation to comprising the revolutionary core of the proletariat. The contemporary decentred Empire of capital shatters such privilege. But this notion of the multitude is difficult to grasp. At once, it becomes 'the class of those who refuse the rule of capital.' (Hardt and Negri, 2005: p. 106) They maintain that:

The concept rests... on the claim that there is no political priority among the forms of labour: all forms of labor are today socially productive, they produce in common, and share too a common potential to resist the domination of capital... The multitude gives the concept of the proletariat its fullest definition as all those who labour and produce under the rule of capital. (Hardt and Negri, 2005: p. 107)

The 'immanence' of the multitude brings with it a certain political potentiality (and therefore a ground for optimism). For in the conditions of life of the multitude are present 'the conditions... for the various types of labour to communicate, collaborate, and become common.' (Hardt and Negri, 2005: p. 106)

So, the multitude are the multiplicity of exploited groups who nevertheless have the potential power to *refuse* the rule of capital. But let us look a little more at some of those Hardt and Negri place under this banner. The traditional working class are part of the multitude. Those who perform domestic labour – women in the household – are part of the multitude. The health care worker is part of the multitude. The agricultural worker in the developing country is part of the multitude. The sex worker is part of the multitude. The 'poor' are part of the multitude. The unemployed are part of the multitude. For, as Hardt and Negri write: 'Just as social production takes place today equally inside and outside the factory walls, so too it takes place equally inside and outside the wage relationship.' (Hardt and Negri, 2005: p. 135) At one point, Hardt and Negri insist that: 'All of the multitude is productive and all of it is poor.' (Hardt and Negri, 2005: p. 134) And elsewhere

not only is the poor in the world, but the poor itself is the very possibility of the world. Only the poor lives radically the actual and present being, in destitution and suffering, and thus only the poor has the ability to renew being. (Hardt and Negri, 2000: p. 157)

Indeed, given what we have said above – particularly regarding Bakunin's 'flower' of the proletariat - it is worth reflecting on what Hardt and Negri say about this particular category. Hardt and Negri bring the poor (as an aspect of the lumpenproletariat) into the category of the proletariat itself. Thus they write:

The poor are thought to be dangerous, either morally dangerous because they are unproductive social parasites – thieves, prostitutes, drug addicts, and the like – or politically dangerous because they are disorganised, unpredictable, and tendentially reactionary. In fact, the term lumpenproletariat... has functioned at times to demonize the poor as a whole. To make complete the disdain for the poor, finally, they are often thought to be merely a residue of pre-industrial social forms, a kind of historical refuse. (Hardt and Negri, 2005: p. 130)

Such a negative understanding of the poor needs, for Hardt and Negri to be rejected. The poor can be genuinely revolutionary. (This is partly because, as they note ‘we are the poor.’ (Hardt and Negri, 2005: p. 152)) Thus they insist that the poor ought not to be ‘excluded’ from the multitude, because: ‘these classes are in fact included in social production... the poor are not merely victims but powerful agents... they are part of the circuits of social and biopolitical production.’ (Hardt and Negri, 2005: p. 129)

Thus, Hardt and Negri’s view of revolutionary agency seems closer to the anarchism of Bakunin, than the Marxian account of proletarian self-emancipation. (That is, the ‘lumpenproletariat’ are not a reactionary ‘Other’ to the proletariat, but rather a constituent element of it.) But then this leaves us with another question? Is Hardt and Negri’s account of revolutionary agency a convincing one in light of current realities?

First, we might note that as a result of this, a disciplined and centralised revolutionary strategy (the party) is pushed to one side. Rather, as we have noted, the constituent power of the multitude is exercised through ‘refusal’. (And there is perhaps an extent to which the lumpenproletariat refuse more than most.) Of refusal Hardt and Negri write: ‘The refusal of work and authority. Or really the refusal of voluntary servitude, is the beginning of liberatory politics.’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000: p. 204) In itself, this statement of the necessity of refusal is more libertarian than it is Marxist, particularly because it gives us no indication of what might be considered as ‘strategy’. And it is about as far removed from a model of democratic centralism as one could imagine. Negri maintains:

The refusal of work shows – with the totality of the project which characterises it, and in a way that is happily contradictory with this project – a great *multiplicity* of aspects, a great wealth and liberty of movements of complex autonomy. Each step towards communism is a movement of extension and an expansion of the whole wealth of differences. (Negri, cited in Weeks, 2005: p. 130)

Hardt and Negri argue that their understanding of refusal ought not to be considered an entirely negative one, writing that: ‘Our lines of flight, our exodus must be constituent and create a real alternative’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000: p. 204). But the ‘real alternatives’ they provide are fragmentary at best; that is, refusal comes to encompass a range of micro-practices which do little in terms of pointing to an alternative socialist future where exploitation and capital accumulation are eradicated. So, the lumpenproletariat resist when they refuse to ‘get a job’. They resist when they refuse to engage in the education system. They resist when they refuse to conform to consumerism.

And to the extent that ‘we’ are ‘the poor’ (that is the exploited), resistance is more far reaching. Resistance occurs when people ‘refuse’ to engage in sexual reproduction. Resistance occurs when there is a refusal to emote in the ‘required’ fashion to a particular media event. People resist when they refuse the dictates of fashion. And according to Harvie (2006), students resist when they plagiarise their coursework!

A number of critical points need to be made here. To begin with, echoing what I said a moment ago about the lumpenproletariat historically, Hardt and Negri’s (as with Bakunin long before them) view of the lumpenproletariat is utopian to say the least. As we have already noted, the exclusion of ‘the lumpenproletariat’ from the formal labour force is often not the result of a conscious decision on the part of these groups, but rather the result of a particular form of structural exclusion – accordingly, they lack constituent power. They may have ‘little to lose’, but it is also difficult to see what they have to gain. They are oppressed, disengaged, depressed, and frequently suicidal. Accordingly, as in Marx’s time, they are largely incapable of representation. And as they cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Unfortunately, it is not radical leftist parties which come to represent them. Rather, it is frequently populist politicians of the far right.

Moving on to Hardt and Negri’s wider remarks concerning refusal. Of the positive alternative ‘possibilities’ they give the example of the subversion of ‘Conventional norms of corporeal and sexual relations between and within genders.’ They enthuse about the subversion implied by ‘dressing in drag.’ Indeed, ‘Bodies themselves transform and mutate to create new posthuman bodies.’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000: p. 215) Whilst such ‘subversions’ are no doubt radical, their emancipatory scope is at best limited. Indeed, it is worth just briefly citing Terry Eagleton in *After Theory* when he writes of how: ‘Socialism has lost out to sado-masochism. Among the students of culture, the body is an immensely fashionable topic, but it is usually the erotic body, not the famished one. There is a keen interest in coupling bodies, but not in labouring ones.’ (Eagleton, 2003: p. 2) For intellectuals with the radical background of Hardt and Negri, it is disappointing that they have to fall back on such an atomistic form of libertarian resistance.

And this brings me to a final very briefly stated criticism. There is no meaningful understanding of the political in Hardt and Negri’s idea of the multitude. That is, there is no indication of how the radical plurality of the multitude might come to be forged into a revolutionary subject capable of societal transformation. For Laclau, this can only be the result of the exercise of hegemonic power. (See Laclau, 2004: p. 24). Laclau is correct up to a point. Yet his understanding of the political is one comprised of an absolute plurality of the elements therein, one which refuses to acknowledge the crucial economic centres of political power (for to do so would comprise a form of ‘economism’). Thus we have two radical alternatives – spontaneously emerging revolutionary activity, or the revolutionary subject as a product of the exercise of political power. What is needed is a fuller understanding of class interests and capacities, such that we can grasp the likely nodal points of struggle in the fight against global capitalism.

Concluding remarks

To begin with, we might ask ‘are Hardt and Negri anarchists or Marxists?’ Well if we take them at face value they are communists, not anarchists; for they write of the ‘unbearable lightness and joy of being communists’. So communists maybe, but Marxists, on balance, not. There are a number of reasons which might be given for this conclusion. First, there is no conception of revolutionary ‘strategy’ as such in their work – rather they see in the multitude the immanent possibility of spontaneous revolutionary activity, an activity without centre – and therefore without authority (say of the ‘Party’). Unfortunately, I have maintained that this is activity without meaningful direction. We see this in their idea of the constituent power of ‘refusal’ – exploitation’s reach necessitates resistance, but given their opposition to theorising a hierarchy of resistance, the very idea of resistance comes to be both trivialised, and directionless. Second, though they universalise the conception of ‘the proletariat’ in ‘the multitude’, this group is far removed from the class conscious workers that Marx considered would comprise the revolutionary agents capable of overthrowing the capitalist mode of production. And while it is perfectly reasonable to problematise Marx’s understanding of revolutionary agency, the hope which Hardt and Negri place in the lumpenproletariat – as with Bakunin before them – is misconceived.

In short, their responses in both these areas are closer to anarchism than Marxism, and I do not find these anarchist responses (at least) to be particularly useful. However, we cannot take this to negate entirely their position. The realities of contemporary ‘global’ capitalism do necessitate revisiting our understanding of power and exploitation, and Hardt and Negri shed interesting new light (in ways only briefly touched on in this paper) on these issues. Though I believe an understanding of class and strategy must be central to any anti-capitalist political project, in the end perhaps the old labels of ‘Marxism’ and ‘anarchism’ do not mean so much.

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