Historical Materialism: Can you tell us something about your intellectual and political background, and how your collaboration with Toni Negri on Empire came about?

Michael Hardt: For one’s own past, one always constructs narratives. In the early 1980s, I was part of a US left youth that sought a kind of self-exportation of revolutionary energies. It seemed impossible for many of us to do politics in the US, and so Central America seemed like the only possibility. I was first working with something that we called the Sanctuary Movement, which was bringing Central Americans – Salvadorans and Guatemalans, mostly – to the US, to churches (it was a church-based movement) and have them tell their tragic stories to affect US public opinion. So, with them, I moved to Mexico City and then, out of frustration with them, went to El Salvador and got more involved with the National University in El Salvador, which seemed to me a more interesting political context.

In any case, from that perspective, it was there, reading Negri’s philosophical work and about what Italy had done in the 1970s, that the Italian context seemed that much closer to my own experience, or my own desires. One of my main complaints about the US Americans in Central America was that we were essentially observers, or sometimes participating,
in someone else’s struggle – but it was clearly not our own. And so the Italian thing seemed closer to home. The Central Americans always told us – and we didn’t know how to respond – they always said: ‘You know, it’s nice that you’re here and that you want to help, but it would really help us most if you went home and made revolution in the US’. And we were all willing, but had no idea of how to do such things. In any case, it was from that perspective that the Italian experiences seemed closer to my own desires, and Negri personally seemed to be one who had managed to have his scholarly and political activities combine – something which I was experiencing a certain amount of frustration with at the time.

Was it the Central Americans who pointed you to Negri?

No, it wasn’t. Actually, what I first read is the book that he co-wrote with Félix Guattari.\(^1\) It was a French version I read, and in fact I translated his Spinoza book\(^2\) in order to meet him. Because he was semi-clandestine in France at the time; I was a lowly graduate student and didn’t know how to present myself. So I went to Paris to ask some translation questions, really – and we had a nice time, and so I moved to Paris and that’s how I got things started.

Originally you were steeped in poststructuralist philosophy – did you move via Guattari to Negri, or directly to your interest in the 1970s in Italy, in the revolutionary movement there?

I knew a little bit of French philosophy before, but I read them mostly when I was in France. From literature programmes in the US I actually read Derrida first, which was much more important in the US than either Foucault or Deleuze or Guattari.

The Italian experience of the 1970s is obviously a very exciting and inspiring period, but it seems still quite alien to an American context. It seems like a very European kind of experience – high levels of class struggle, many large-scale revolutionary organisations, direct conflict with the state, and so on. It doesn’t seem like something that would automatically attract somebody from the US.

Right, but what else did I have to choose from? If only I knew Japanese, maybe that would have been better.

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What about the place of Empire itself in this trajectory?

Its origin, in part, is in Toni’s and my thinking after working on *Labor of Dionysus,*\(^3\) that it was a very Euro-American book, and wasn’t able to grasp things going on elsewhere. So it was probably a questioning of, you know, ‘Do similar ideas actually correspond to what’s going on in other parts of the world?’ That was part of it, and then obviously, feeling engaged with other people. Postcolonial studies seemed very interesting to me in the mid-1990s – subaltern studies in particular. So, partly, it’s a result of the work of others, that seemed useful.

Presumably all of that stuff was quite new to Negri? Postcolonial studies and so forth?

Yes, it was. That literature’s new to him, and we always worked – this is the nice thing about collaboration – by giving each other reading lists, and suggesting books to read. It’s one of the nicest things about writing with someone, is that they insist on certain things. And then, strangely enough, something that I was previously interested in, I’d get him to start reading it, and he’s the one who actually does most of the work on that aspect, or something like that. I hadn’t read Carl Schmitt before writing this book, but then Toni used to say, read him and I’d write most of the Schmitt part.

Is Empire the product of a broader intellectual collaboration or project shared with other activists and theorists?

If I understand what you’re asking, it’s just the context in which the two of us find ourselves. I mean, I, and particularly my colleagues in my university, and then the people I know in the US, obviously are a primary reference. And then Paris was – for Negri, in particular, and for me also – an important context. But it wasn’t a conscious project to say: ‘Let’s experiment to and see if we can put European thought and US thought together.’ It’s a kind of dialogue between the two of us, and each of us has certain referents. One should also point out, it’s not just that we have a US-er and a European that have got together. Toni has a history of great engagement with US movements and intellectual work, and I, of course, was really formed in European thought. So it’s more like there’s a dialogue within each of us, as much as between the two of us.

\(^3\) Hardt and Negri 1994.
From our perspective as a Marxist journal, what’s particularly striking and refreshing about the book, in terms of the general intellectual context, is all these names dusted off from the attic, who had been consigned to irrelevance – not just Marx and Lenin, but also Otto Bauer, Rosa Luxemburg. Interesting absence of Trotsky, he’s the only one, I think, who isn’t mentioned throughout the whole book. Is that a common intellectual context that you shared, or was that coming more from Negri’s background and history in the general Marxist movement?

He was formed in a different period than me, so there might be a difference there. But both of us come out of general Marxist traditions, so I mean, they’re reference points for each of us, and in that sense we did think it was important – maybe each time we write something, it seems important to us to gauge what we’re working on against, or in relation to, the history of Marxist theorising. And not always as if we’re posing a direct continuity with all of the tradition – while the tradition is so varied, also – but that it seems necessary to say how this relates to Lenin’s work, or to Luxemburg’s work, and not just assume that it’s completely different because we’re in different times.

That’s a striking feature of Negri’s work generally, though, isn’t it? In Insurgencies, for example, and in this book, there is a retrieval of these Marxist classics. It’s critical, it’s full of qualifications, and so on, but the fact that Negri doesn’t simply throw Lenin overboard, for instance, but takes him seriously as a thinker – not just a political activist – is a brave and important thing, in terms of not dumping a whole tradition. It’s quite unusual for a book published by Harvard University Press.

I know. Well that’s their fault! They misunderstood. But it seems perfectly coherent for us. And useful – I mean, one always gets something, one always learns something new by returning to these texts. So I mean, we don’t do it, certainly, as a matter of paying homage; in a way – it’s to learn something.

Can we turn to the book itself, and perhaps follow the structure of the text as you present it. To what extent can the Constitution of Empire as you outline it at the outset of the book, be understood as a realisation of a cosmopolitan, liberal-internationalist project for an international order that will secure perpetual peace?

One has to approach the tradition with a certain irony, or duplicity, because there are perspectives from which such a peace could be realisable. But it’s obviously not a peace; it’s a peace that’s completely underwritten by wars,

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by violence of different kinds – also by international hierarchies, and hierarchies that are not defined along national lines. So I think that, in a way, it’s interesting to follow that tradition, partly because of the influence it’s had in legal formations, and at the same time to see the underside of that tradition – the implicit, unsaid of that notion of international peace.

There’s another operation going on here, or another, let’s say, methodological approach, that one might question, which is that, in a way, we’re privileging the legal and juridical formation by starting that way. I think that it would be a mistake for the book to give that impression, because I don’t think that the juridical is somehow primary to cultural formations, other political formations, economic formations. It seemed to us, rhetorically – I mean, also in the process of our own understanding, which probably betrays our own past – that that legal framework seemed like the best introduction to us. And one shouldn’t think of it as exclusive – I think of other formations. In fact, I think someone else might start from the economic, and then arrive at this. We started from the juridical because it seemed like an entry point.

And Negri’s background is jurisprudence, isn’t it?5

Right. His original background is very much philosophical-legal philosophy was the title of his position. In Italy they called it ‘state theory’, but I think we would call it something like ‘legal theory’.

In what ways do you see this tendency towards a network society, a global network society, or a society of control, as you call it, being causally related to the Constitution of Empire?

Well, just so there isn’t confusion, I think there are two separate things: one is the question about immaterial labour, or changes in the nature of labour forms or, really, hierarchies among different forms of labour. That I don’t think is causally related to the juridical formation. I mean, I think it develops in parallel, but not as if it were primary over the legal. It’s a separate question, really, about the network structure of power, which I don’t think is a result of technological innovations. In other words, in a way, the internet, or the notion of network more generally, has given us an imaginative schema for understanding a form of power; but it’s not like it was caused by the invention of the internet, or some other information-communication structures. I guess one could get that idea, say, from Castells’s work, that the technological

5 See, for example, Negri 1958 and Negri 1962.
revolutions have in fact created a new form of power. Our argument about network power, as we call it, has a much different history, and doesn’t coincide in the same way. It doesn’t seem to me to be causally related.

In the book, you say that ‘the multitude called Empire into being’. You suggest that Empire is a response to the various struggles against modern machineries of power, and, specifically, to class struggle, driven by the multitude’s desire for liberation. Could you provide some illustrations where you feel that the Constitution of Empire has been the product of struggles by the multitude?

I’ll give the one that comes to mind immediately – it’s probably a bad example to give, because it’s undertheorised, but it’s in the second half of the book – which is more or less the claim that the struggles of a global ’68 not only made impossible a certain disciplinary régime of labour, and created the need for a new régime, but also prefigured that new régime. In other words, our claim in that chapter is that the same qualities that defined the movements against the global disciplinary régime, as we’re calling it there – including feminist movements, student movements, worker movements, anti-imperialist movements – the qualities which I think we defined summarily as something like the communication, the importance of knowledge, the importance of affect . . . I can’t remember the other points – that those are the same axes on which capital restructured production, at least restructured the pinnacle of production.

So this is the way the Italian tradition of operaismo defines this, and it is Mario Tronti that defines it this way. Tronti says that the working class precedes and prefigures the successive restructurations of capital, which is a big claim. It’s not only that the struggle leads capital to change, but that it actually prefigures the changes that capital will make. In other words, the struggles of the working class are the only creative aspect – capital only recuperates and steps back. The primary example in Marx’s writing that Tronti gives, which is a reasonable one, is the part in Volume I on the factory, when Marx is talking about machines and says, famously, that a whole history of technological innovations could be written since – I can’t remember when, 1830 or something – based on the struggles of workers; I think Tronti summarises those passages as saying, ‘Where there are strikes, machines will follow’, meaning that the technology of capital follows dependent upon the

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6 Tronti 1971.
struggles of the working class. I think that is a fundamental theoretical axiom in our book – that it’s fundamentally the creativity of labour that defines society, and that forms of power are dependent upon that.

I wanted to follow up on that, because the book can be read uncharitably as expressing an almost vitalist notion that everything that’s creative, that’s passionate, that’s desiring, that’s positive, that’s formative, is on the side of the multitudes, of the proletariats; and capital is reactive, I think as you say – especially in your more lyrical passages – capital is vampiric, capital is always one step back, capital always adapts itself to the circumstances, tries to recuperate, but doesn’t seem to have any motive force of its own, apart from what it recuperates, or what it sucks, from the multitude. How do you guard against those two dangers: voluntarism and hyper-optimism on the one hand; and, secondly, a view of crisis which itself, the critics would say, is taken from neoliberal explanations of crisis, rather than strictly Marxist ones?

I’m not sure about that last bit, but anyway, let me come to the first part. There are two things. On the more specific, it is important, I think, to always emphasise the role of labour, the role of the multitude in its creative aspects, because those are the ones that are most hidden, and the most traditionally misunderstood. So that, it seems to me, there’s more need, rhetorically, to emphasise those moments, because the assumption is always that capital is the creative one – for instance that globalisation was the dream of capital, and that workers were always therefore anti-global. So, I think that you’re right to insist on a – I don’t want to say dialectical, but at least a reciprocal – relationship, in that.

The next question, about victory and loss, reminds me of two things. This is one reason why I like so much the bit from William Morris that we used as an epigraph, where Morris is essentially saying what we were saying, which is that what look to be failures turn out to be victories, but then a false kind of victory, and one has to in fact struggle for something new based on that. It’s that kind of notion that we wanted to . . . that the failures aren’t purely failures. Maybe that’s how I’d put it. They’re not, also, unqualified victories. This is what reminds me of Fred Jameson’s ‘winners lose’ scenario – that he’s focusing on the other side, really; what looks like the side that won in fact, actually, it turns out that they lost. We’re really talking about the same thing.

Lenin says somewhere – it must have been after 1905 – that the history of
communism is all about defeats. He was talking about the Commune, about 1905. He says, ‘We’re all about defeats, of course we’ve always had defeats, but that doesn’t mean that it hasn’t grown and that it isn’t victorious.’ And maybe, then Fred might say, well, 1917 turns out to be a greater loss than some others – he could say such a thing. I guess, in both cases, you’re adding a sort of second side to what we’re doing, which seems to me perfectly appropriate – although I would still like to insist on the importance of emphasizing this one side, both, I think, because we’ve had the tendency to undervalue it, and also it can provide the seeds for a future.

Let me just go into that a little bit more. The book has been characterised as being optimistic. In certain ways, I’m sure that’s true. I think often, though, what’s meant by optimism is some sort of hope that the future will be better without any real basis for thinking so. And it’s this argument that seems to me one of the ways in which it’s not so much optimism, but a confidence in the movements of history. In other words, to the extent that we can demonstrate that the present situation was in fact created by the multitude, or by the proletariat – created, of course, and then distorted in [certain] ways – we can recognise our own power in the present form of domination, it then leaves us not powerless; it leaves us with a recognition of a kind of history of power, that then can be used alternatively. For instance, if one were to accept that, as I said, rather shaky hypothesis about how the movements of ’68, in a way, formed the axes for the new immaterial economy, then one could say, well, this new immaterial economy is not merely a form of domination; it’s also a result – a distorted result – of our own power. And we could use that power again to destroy this form of domination, and do something more. In a way, all of the book, it seems to me, is arguing against a feeling of powerlessness on the Left, and hopefully in justified ways.

Linking onto this, one of the refreshing and welcome aspects of the text is that it’s not exclusively on the structures, the powerful structures, of global capitalism, but also about the possibilities, the potentials, of transformation, which as you say in the book, are rooted materially. But, in the book, you also talk about the need to reject notions of strategy, or the old distinctions between strategy and tactics, and instead invoke this serpentine metaphor – the various struggles going on, Tiananmen, Chiapas, Indonesia, wherever it may be – the surging up of these movements.

Isn’t it precisely the absence of internationalist, transnational, old-style solidarity that may be partially accountable for these defeats? Because, frankly – for all the changes that have taken place in Chinese society, and certainly in Mexican society,
as a result of these protests – the fact of the matter is that the EZLN has been defeated in terms of its strategic objectives. Is this rejection of the idea of strategy and tactics not premature, as reflected in recent historical events?

Right. Let me try two separate things. One is that what we’re responding to in that Chapter, 1.3, where we talk about these various movements of the early 1990s – because it was before Seattle at that point – we recognise already the motto of what was more or less, ‘Think globally, act globally’. And the question is, of course, how do you act globally? Well, proletarian internationalism had functioned as a kind of global action, and particularly through cycles of struggles. And cycles of struggles were, of course, local, but they were repeatable in different local contexts – in other words, one could be in Hanoi and see what had happened in Shanghai, and say, ‘Well, that’s our struggle’, and, sometimes through misrecognition, recreate it, and create a sort of chain that extends globally. And that kind of horizontal organisation seemed to us the way that proletarian internationalism formed a kind of global action throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century – anti-slavery revolts, national liberation movements, in various ways.

It seemed to us that, since ‘68, that was no longer happening, and these struggles in particular that you are pointing to seemed to us distinctive for the fact that they did not create chains, that they did not create cycles. What we were puzzling over is, well, if movements aren’t doing that now, how can they act locally? And our one hypothesis was that, perhaps, rather than gaining global significance by extending themselves horizontally in different regions, each of them were addressing global issues immediately. Chiapas, of course, was about racial relationships within Mexico, about particularly Mexican things, but it was also about NAFTA, it was also about globalisation. So that, it in a way leapt, in that sense, directly to the global level. I do agree with you that that’s a weakness, and in fact what we were thinking about was two things that had existed in a previous era that didn’t exist today: one was a recognition of a common enemy, which is a complex question; and the second is a common language, in the sense that proletarian internationalism, or Third-World liberation, formed common languages that could travel from one region to another. And these seemed to us at least two aspects that were missing, and that therefore needed to be created in order to extend struggles in the way that you were suggesting.

My second point is about strategy and tactics. Toni wrote a book about Lenin – he wrote it, maybe, in 1977, I think – called Thirty-Three Lessons on
Lenin or something like that. I think it only exists in Italian. I remember that Toni was reading Lenin on worker organisations, and the forms of organisation relating to labour. And his argument was that it would be an ahistorical reading of Lenin to take the same structure, the same form of organisation, that was appropriate then, and transport it to a later time period; that, in fact, he said, the secret to, or the essential point, of Lenin’s theory of political organisation was that the dominant form of labour in a specific society suggested the form that was most powerful for the political organisation of contestation. So that the hierarchical and centralised form of factory labour in Russia at the turn of the century provided the model for Bolshevik organisation. Later, what they called in Italy the mass worker suggested, in a way, a mass party. Now, what then one should think of is what forms of labour could suggest today the political form of organisation, and that seems to me a useful way of posing the question.

I don’t have, and certainly Toni and I don’t have an answer in the book – I’m not sure if you asked Toni, Toni will always give you an answer, whatever you ask him – but what I would say is, that’s a way of posing the question – I don’t have an answer to what the adequate form of political organisation is today, but it seems to me one useful way of approaching it is through an analysis of forms of relationships among labour today, and in a way transposing that to invent a form of political organisation adequate to it. So, that’s sort of related to strategy and tactics, right?

In relation to that, then, do you think that, because you say cycles are over, and …

Well, they were.

OK, but a clear cycle did emerge from Seattle to Genoa. What does that say about your thesis on the incommunicability of struggles? Because it does seem like there are common enemies, or some such things, and there is, if not a common language, some common slogans – you know, ‘The World Is Not for Sale’, ‘No Justice, No Peace’, which are shared globally, even if there is not yet a common language to structure them and to formulate them.

Limited. Yeah, I agree with you, though. I think that there is something that is different, that’s emerged since we wrote it. And it is clearly a cycle, of sorts, and there is developing a common language and common enemies. I think that there are some ways in which they’re inadequate, but the way it always
is in such movements. I mean, it seems to me those are internal arguments within the movement that I would have. It seems to me, a fundamental challenge for these movements now is the extension of this cycle outside of the north Atlantic context – the north Atlantic and Australia, I guess. I mean, what’s clear is it’s not just people in the US, or North America and Europe and Australia, who are opposed to the super-national economic organisations. There are, of course, riots in Jamaica against the IMF, a variety of other places. It’s that, though, this cycle of struggles has not been able to communicate with such places – it’s not been able to extend itself. I’m not saying anything new here – most people in the movements recognise it’s an important challenge, too. It’s a large one – it’s not a very easy thing to do. For instance, I was in Indonesia before Genoa. It was a couple of weeks before, and I was meeting with these anarchist groups. I mean, I was on vacation – but anyway . . .

That’s what you do on vacation, is it?

Well, it’s fun! And they were sort of anarcho-punk groups, and they really wanted to go to Genoa. You know, it’s not like they didn’t have common desires to people their own age in Europe or the US; it’s that, (a) there’s no way they could fly to Genoa, and (b) if they try to do something in Jakarta, they get the shit beat out of them. So, I mean, there are objective problems – that’s all I meant, is that it’s not the kind of problem that, once various people in the movement say, yeah, this should happen, it’s going to mean it would happen – it requires a much larger revolution. But the only reason I launched on that is that I thought there are important ways in which this cycle of struggles is not yet a global cycle, and that that would be an important challenge for it.

You make a strong case in the book (which, I think, in all kinds of other ways, later has implications for the argument) about sovereignty emerging in the context of the two modernities – in Europe and in particular in relation to its extra-European Other. Yet, numerous Marxist historians have suggested that in fact the origins of capitalism and modern sovereignty are quite Eurocentric, in a strict historical sense. And not just Eurocentric, but emerged in England at a very particular conjuncture – I’m thinking of Robert Brenner’s and Ellen Wood’s arguments. How would you counter this?

I don’t quite see the differences so much. I mean, that we focus on Renaissance philosophy and Bob Brenner focuses on English agrarian economics. In a way, I think that what we’re both getting at a similar European and, in many
ways, pan-European transformation of forms of power at the end of the Middle Ages. I mean, there are two things that we add to this, but I’m not sure that they conflict with that hypothesis. The one thing that we insist upon is that, again, with the same paradigm that we were talking about before, that it wasn’t that these forms of power were invented by the emerging bourgeoisie, or rich capitalist farmers; it’s that, in a way, there were struggles of liberation that forced this first modernity of the great expression of both secularism and humanism, was countered in a recuperative way by another modernity. That’s one thing that we’ve added, but I’m not sure that that conflicts with Brenner – we’ll see in a minute.

The other is simply Europe’s relationship with non-Europe – the early colonial project. I think that we have an equally Eurocentric description of sovereignty. One should then discuss whether that’s a problem or not, but ours is Eurocentric – it’s just that the ‘centrism’ of Europe was continually in dialogue with and in conflict with its projects of conquest. And so, sometimes, the instruments of European power, and also the elements of European knowledge and musical inventions, etc., came from the colonial territories. Not because of any superiority of the colonies – in fact, in relationships of domination – but simply as a kind of recuperation of the creative energies. One famous Mexicanist writes of the ways that early Meso-American relationships with Spain produced a catalogue of European cultural forms that we thought were strictly European – musical forms, the sarabande and some others that he in fact shows were taken from Meso-America. The point is, people say ‘You’re trying to talk about a global trend of power, and yet your argument is Eurocentric, and Euro-American centred.’ And my response is that it’s Eurocentric because that is the path of the genealogy of power that we’re following.

I like the way a Chinese historian who works with me puts it. He wonders, writing about Chinese history, why it is that Eurocentrism won and other ‘centrism’ in the early modern period – Sinocentrism is what he studied – why didn’t that influence the world, and he says – quite simply but I think largely true – that it’s the success of capital working hand-in-hand with Eurocentrism, that made, in a way, the trajectory that we trace in our argument. So, in a way, it seems to me not necessarily a Eurocentrism on our part to recognise the European trajectory of those forms of power. But that’s, maybe, a defence that’s not as much required in this context as it is in the US – but it’s constantly brought up in the US.
I know it’s meant to be metaphorical, and in a way playful, but there’s this calendar that you speak of, where decolonisation is the equivalent of February, and October never arrives. But of course, seen through the perspective of, say, an Algerian, even of our generation – or a Vietnamese or a Cuban – clearly that calendar isn’t the same one, it seems to me, because February and October coincided, as it were. And indeed, in many other instances, there is still a project of October coming, in the context of those new states.

Hold on a second – just go back a second. Because you said that February and October came together, and then you said there’s still a project of October coming. Did it come or not?

I suppose I’m getting at two sets of questions. One is: should the notions of historical time that we employ, in terms of these changes, be made geographically variable? And, secondly, in relation to the book itself, there are several instances where you endorse the very transcendental power of the state, like for example in your references to the truth commissions in South Africa and in Central America, where it’s precisely the modern state – bourgeois it may be – that is capable of, at least formally, representing the interests of those that have been victims. So I saw a contradiction there, and I’m just a bit concerned that, again, you dismiss the idea of national liberation being a poisoned gift.

It is, though, isn’t it? Okay, let me start. Well, I can just do the truth commissions quickly. I mean, I think that it’s not really an endorsement of the state in that passage – it’s merely recognition that, in the context of certain postmodernist discourses, one shouldn’t dismiss claims to truth so quickly; that there are certain contexts in which truth is in fact not a problem, and is not ungrounded. And, in those instances, I do think that it’s important to pursue such projects, such as the South African Truth Commission, with huge problems and limitations. But that seems to me a rather limited question.

I think what I’m fundamentally in agreement with in your question is the matter of temporality. In other words, I think that there have been enormous confusions, and even disasters, created in the past by imagining a linear progression of different social struggles. The caricature of it is, of course, the stage theories in which the assumption is, each society will go through similar stages, just at different periods of time. So that, in colonial thought, primarily the colonies were always thought to be functioning in a kind of time-lag – always anachronistic. And, as clear as that might be, it crops up in thought over and over again. And I think it’s something that each of us has to be
aware of in our thought, because it seems to be such a powerful model that keeps cropping up.

So, [from what you say], this is what I understand: that one shouldn’t project a certain calendar onto various struggles for liberation, because they’re not functioning in the same world in which previous ones functioned. That seems exactly right to me; it seems to me that’s a kind of anachronistic thought, that is invalid, inappropriate. The real challenge is to try to understand the contemporaneity of the world, which is more of a challenge than it might seem at first. There are of course many people working in an auto factory in São Paulo today, and that auto factory is actually not technologically similar – but even if it were technologically similar to the one in Detroit in 1930, it’s a fundamentally different industrial working class; and it relates differently within the global economic structure, and so really should not be related back to something that previously existed in Detroit fifty or seventy years ago. It has to be thought in a contemporary way, with the various kinds of production that are going on globally. It’s that challenge of thinking contemporaneity that seems to me central here. The one thing that we are very insistent about – perhaps to excess, but that’s what we think – is a refusal of the nation-state form as liberatory. That’s not meant to imply a critique in retrospect of national liberation struggles. It seems quite possible to me that that was the only form in which to conduct the anticolonial struggles. Nonetheless, I think that the resulting nation was, in a variety of ways, hopelessly poisoned. I mean, in obvious other ways, which we’re not disagreeing about – for instance, in economic terms – they were faced with absolutely hopeless situations. But, precisely in political terms – I think that’s what we are discussing specifically – I think that the nation-state form itself introduced, or required, a series of hierarchies and the maintenance of forms of power that were detrimental. But, anyway, I think that’s the substance of the disagreement.

*Just a quick follow on from that discussion on the question of temporalities and national liberation movements. It surprises me that Trotsky has no entry in the book’s index, because your critique of stageist views, deterministic stageist views of history; your focus on globality rather than the nation-state; your focus on permanent revolution and insurgencies . . .

Sure. All those fit very well.

They all fit very well, and there’s a passage in the book where you say Marxists have underestimated the unevenness of the spread of imperialism in its particular national
forms that it takes in different areas of the world. And, obviously, Trotsky’s notion of combined and uneven development is precisely an attempt to try and theorise that. All those things seem to fit very well with many aspects of the book, and yet you don’t touch on him at all. Is that just coincidence, or does that indicate a more general disagreement or critique of his view?

No, I think it’s just a missed opportunity. But I think Toni and I are less familiar with Trotsky’s work than with Lenin’s work, but, sometimes, those kind of familiarities are just coincidences of background.

Your text derives much more from the first part of the Communist Manifesto, which celebrates the dynamic and indeed revolutionary powers of the bourgeoisie, and capitalism as its concrete expression. One critic talks of your and Toni’s understanding as ‘hyper-globalist’. My quarrel with this is the absence – and I think it’s not just at the analytical level, but also the political level – of mediations. Throughout the book you seem to emphasise direct, unmediated power relations. Yet contemporary capitalism is arguably sustained through mediating structures of states, kinship relations or even multilateral organisations. If you take Saudi Arabia, for example, it’s obvious that forms of power and authority heavily dependent on kinship networks are still reproducing what appears to be a capitalist state, in terms of social relations. There are still precapitalist forms of exploitation, precapitalist forms of domination in the present, throughout the global international system. To put the question in your own terms: isn’t your insistence on the real as opposed to the formal subsumption of labour across the world again, overstated?

I wonder if the formulations that you’ve just given, though, don’t participate in that kind of historical anachronism argument that we were just talking about. I mean, I wonder, if one has to think these elements that are non-capitalist not as precapitalist, or not as remainders of ancient or historical forms, but as something within the system, and therefore equally contemporary. I’m not sure about that – that’s an interesting thing.

But what I was going to start with was that, for me, this was something starting in the 1980s that bothered me about these various theories of civil society, that seemed to place civil society as a realm of mediation outside of capital and the state, and therefore posed as a potential realm of liberation. There was both a Habermasian school that moved in this direction, and a school – well, I don’t know how to characterise the other one – neo-Gramscian perhaps. And I assume I have certain affinities with both, but this seemed to me both politically defeating, or politically harmful, and also analytically
incorrect – that those forms of social mediation both were central and functioning, and that they could be the mechanisms of liberation. So, in any case, often when Toni and I talked about mediation, or about lack of mediations, it’s the lack of those mediations – in a way, the lack of social institutions that function to mediate the relationship between capital and labour, or between the state and the population – that these are social institutions that have declined in their functions.

But that’s a different matter of mediations than you were talking about, so let me try to come to your direct questions. I guess I’m thinking now about the question of institutions that are non-capitalist, or at least have non-capitalist derivation, that are participating – how to think them. And how to think their simultaneity, like I was saying before. Our hypothesis is that this is in fact one global capitalist system that has internal variations, rather than externalities. I wonder sometimes – this thing, ‘There is no more outside’, the slogan is the thing that has generated the most . . . I don’t know if outrage, but at least controversy. Sometimes, though, I’ve been wondering to what extent it’s just a terminological difference, if someone says, ‘Oh, that’s an outside, or this is an outside.’ Because we’re not really disagreeing with that.

Let me come to another example: someone will say, for instance, ‘Yes, of course, there are outsiders – sub-Saharan Africa is outside of the consumer circuit and even the production – I mean, its capital doesn’t need that labour.’ Well, that’s true, in those senses. If one looks from the perspective of debt, however, sub-Saharan Africa’s certainly inside with respect to debt; and debt is the primary disciplinary mechanism of global capital. So that, I guess what I’m trying to say is that there are some perspectives from which, of course, these places are inside – and that it’s important to remember that ‘insideness’. There are others in which, like the consumer markets, or even the necessities of labour to the capitalist system, in which they are effectively excluded, and that’s an important question too. So, whether it’s inside or outside, I’m not sure – maybe it’s a stupid question in a certain way – once you actually make specific what’s meant by the different things. The real challenge here – if one cuts through the various terminological provinces – how do you think difference, and radical difference, within one common system?

And that’s where I think try to come back to the Saudi monarchy. Here, we have a radically different form – certainly not common in Europe now, and it’s locally specific. And, yet, it functions within the global capitalist system, obviously: Saudi monarchs are, in a variety of ways, from a variety
of perspectives, completely within it. So one has to both think – maybe this is the problem that our project as a whole is trying to address – to think the unlimited nature of this form of rule, of Empire, of global capital; and yet recognise the singularity of local, if you want – or geographical – differences. I wouldn’t try to say, ‘We have the answer, read our book and that will no longer be a problem’ – so I don’t think that we’ve somehow solved it. On the other hand, I don’t think we’re in any way not conscious of that problem. It seems to me something that we’re all facing and trying to struggle with. It makes me think of the last part of David Harvey’s *Limits to Capital*, which is all about this, saying that Marx thought time, but he didn’t think space. And, so, he tries to, through theorising ground rent and so forth, he’s trying to think how spatial differences matter within capital. And I think that’s one way of posing a similar question.

The book emphasises the operation of capital as a plane. There’s no structures, hierarchies, striations, indeed no centres of power. In the book, there are several instances where you flatly reject these categories and suggest instead that we are witnessing an unmediated form of global capital. But, equally, towards the end you invoke the Roman Empire by suggesting that Washington, New York and Los Angeles are ‘the new Romes, or cluster of new Romes’. How you reconcile that? To put it bluntly: is there not a disproportionate concentration of global power in somewhere like Washington, DC.?

Right, certainly there’s differences. If one’s going to say that there are no fixed divisions and boundaries, that doesn’t of course mean that everything’s the same, and homogeneous. Deleuze and Guattari would talk about deterritorialisation that’s always involved in reterritorialisation, or we could talk about a kind of smoothing of space that then has new, sometimes hyper-striation, that’s involved in the same operation. So it’s not that things are made the same; it’s that there’s a different way that differences are managed. That’s what I would say.

But let me come back to the first thing. I’m thinking of one part of the book, in which we’re trying to talk about the relationship between capital and sovereignty. It seems to me that, in a way, we’re experimenting with Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the immanence of capital, and reading its contradiction with the transcendence of sovereignty. Even in this estimation, however, it’s not that the institutions that regulate capital, and that foster capital, it’s that capital itself is. And, in fact, we go through another rough
genealogy of such things, and try to read the different forms of relationship between state and capital as a making of the state more adequate to the immanence of capital; and that’s what, in a way, imperialism – as we’re defining it, in its mostly nineteenth-century European form – presented a kind of transcendence that interrupted the flows of capital, that forced it into remaining, say, within the bloc of the British Empire; or even the distinctions between metropole and colony sometimes disrupted the developments of capital; that these, in a way, were barriers that had to be overcome. That’s the way we try to talk about this sort of historical dance between capital and the state, as relationships to one another. So the immanence of capital doesn’t prohibit the transcendence of institutions and forms of power; it’s just that there has to be continual negotiation between the two.

I just don’t see how you can think this combination in a non-dialectical, anti-dialectical fashion. I mean, I absolutely accept that you can talk about the immanence of capital; you can talk about the pure logic – if you like a tendency in capital towards flattening and towards immanence. But if you leave it at that, then you just end up with a new liberal fantasy, basically, which is that markets can exist without institutions. Capital is always already institutionalised, it never attains its pure form, from the beginning. It’s not an alien thing that comes from the outside to constrict it; it’s always that from the beginning. Surely, that’s a classic example of dialectics there, isn’t it? Two contradictory tendencies that form a unity.

Well, sure, call that dialectics. I mean, I wonder if that’s another terminological problem. I mean, there’s a specific form of dialectics that I think Toni and I both are fixated on; but there’s a variety of ways in which the dialectic appears. In the tradition, in Marx’s own work. I mean, it’s not that the dialectic is one thing.

You see, at one end of the spectrum, one says, well, the dialectic means mutual determination and constant interactions; relationality. Bertell Ollman said something like that. I would say, of course. I mean, if that’s the dialectic, then how can one be against it? But, at the other end of the spectrum, if one thinks of it as the proposition of opposites that, through their contradiction, lead to a third turn which subsumes the two in a new unity, that’s the form that Toni and I have been fixated on – the resolving, teleological, mostly Hegelian conception, that has functioned in a variety of ways in left politics. That’s what we’re opposing.

Anyway, all I meant by that digression is to say – and it’s often this way when one conducts a sort of polemic against a form, there’s a tendency
to have it overgeneralised, and not recognise it’s specific. And also, that polemic matters sometimes; other times it doesn’t. At the moment, I’m not particularly tied to it. There are certain times when it appears as an important gesture, or corrective.

I’ve often thought that there are two central ambiguities in the book that Toni and I don’t resolve, because we can’t resolve them satisfactorily. One of them is the relationship between multitude and proletariat; and the other’s the relation between Empire and the US. I think that it’s important, in many respects – and I think, as a US-er, I’m sometimes more insistent on this than Toni is – to insist that the US as nation-state is not in control of contemporary globalisation; in other words, that this empire is not centred in the US. I find that a very important argument. Why important? Well, one, at the most basic level, I think that anti-Americanism is an unsatisfactory politics, both in the US and elsewhere. I think that it mistakes a number of things about the forms of power, and therefore has problematic political consequences. And I guess the second part of that is that it also tends to construct the national as one thing – and therefore one fails to recognise all of the wonderful histories within the United States, that should be linked to elsewhere and affirmed. That said, however, it is important to recognise the unequal relationships, and the importance of geographies; it’s just that the geographies are not simple.

For instance, when we argue against First and Third World division, or even North and South division, it’s not because the world is the same everywhere; it’s in fact that it’s more complicated than that. If one is going to draw the lines, they don’t follow national borders. In fact, within each local space, there’s a variety of spaces so that one needs to try to think relationships of commonality across national borders, and difference within national borders. That’s what one has to do.

So, yes, one should recognise the ways in which the US is the most powerful of nation-states; but, at the same time, not create the illusion – because I think it’s an illusion – that the US as nation-state is in fact in control of things. That would be my first critique of September 11. This is simple: I think everyone has nothing interesting to say about September 11, me included. But an obvious thing, it seems to me, is that the two contestants – the attackers and the US government – are both operating on a kind of nostalgia for a previous form of power. In other words, as far as I can hypothesise about what the attackers think, it would be that there is a centre to global power, and it’s located in Washington and New York; and, therefore, it can be attacked, and
threatened, and that will change the dynamics of global order in a way that will grant us more self-autonomy or some such thing. I assume that’s more or less what’s aimed at. And, similarly, the US government thinks that with a redoubled martial effort, it can both secure the safety of its own territory and impose a kind of peace through police on the globe. It’s also mistaken; it’s also thinking, I think, that it can play that central role. And, in fact, I think that – in this sense, at least – they’re prisoners of the same illusion.

False consciousness? Suffering from imperialist false consciousness?

Yeah. Or nostalgia for previous forms of power. Like when in the US, right after September 11, the government kept talking about Pearl Harbor, as if they had some Japan to go attack. I mean, it seemed to me the nostalgia for a sovereign enemy. And when they find themselves faced with a network, there’s a kind of vertigo, and that’s where I think that nostalgia emerges. They have this amazing military technology, and they don’t have adequate targets to point it at.

So there’s nothing distinctively imperial – as opposed to imperialist – about the current Afghanistan war? You say imperialism’s over, it’s finished, we’re in a new phase. Here we have a test case, a perfect test case for whether that’s true.

Well, I maintain what I thought before September 11. I think most people do, actually. You hear, at least in the US, everyone saying ‘The world completely changed, everything changed’ and then they say the same damn thing they said the week before. I think most of us probably think the same thing we thought before, and just try to apply it to this – I’m guilty of the same thing. Anyway, if the world did change, it’s going to take a while to think about it. I think you’re right, that this is a test case in the sense that one could interpret the result as the imperialism of the sole remaining superpower: it was threatened and now it’s responding. I still think that that’s not true, and that the fact that it’s not true will have that what they’re aiming for will not come about – I mean, that the US cannot exert the power of itself as nation-state over the global territory in such a way as to pacify the globe. I think that if it were to act not-unilaterally, but engage in more widespread, international, institutional structures, it would have much more success at those goals.

But you said that about Vietnam – and you said Vietnam was the last gasp of the American attempt at old-style imperialism, and then Empire dawned. And here we are, thirty years later, with the same thing again.
It’s like one of those bad horror movies, when they’re buried and then the hand comes back out of the grave, and grabs you by the. . . . Yeah, but usually, there’s only a few minutes left in the movie.

You could then interpret Al Qaeda, rather than being an atavistic and archaic organisation, as being well in advance of the American military; as being the spirit of the times.

I wouldn’t say it’s the spirit of the times. . . . I don’t know if you’ve seen, since September 11 there have been right-wing press attacks on Toni and me in the US. There were one or two – either the National Review, or the New Republic, or both – who said that we were not only antisemitic, but we were pro-Islamic fundamentalist; and their justification, the way they illustrated our support for Islamic fundamentalism, is that we say that Islamic fundamentalism – like Christian fundamentalism, too – is not some primordial resurgence, but actually happens to be what’s going on in the world today. We, at the time, polemically compared fundamentalist with postmodernist discourses, and say that both of them are recognising something different, but have inadequate interpretations of it.

I think that was a very strong, impressive, element of the book – the way you polemicised against the idea that Islamic fundamentalism is merely a throwback, some attempt to go backwards; that it’s a more complicated phenomenon than that. But the current structure of US military power, exercised more or less unilaterally, with a few allies tagging along behind, against a rogue state – it doesn’t look very imperial to me, it looks . . .

It doesn’t – you’re right. This is what my theoretical perspective forces me to say. That’s why I think they’re mistaken. To put it in a more mainstream media way, if this is a network – if it’s not just bin Laden and a bunch of flunkies – if it’s actually a network and has a social basis, one can’t attack a network in a singular way. One has to have, in a way, a network approach that is going to address another network. So, therefore, the unilateral decisions of the US military, even if it keeps some other powers as so-called allies, won’t be able to attack a network. That’s my interpretation of it.

Castells has said a similar thing, setting himself up as a kind of unofficial adviser of the US military, saying you need to set up counter-networks, and this is how you do it.
Oh – I’m glad he has an idea! Well, I’m not sure if I’m glad, but anyway, it’s interesting that he has an idea. I mean, I do think that there are enormous tragedies that can result from this mistaken impression on the US government’s part, that it could conduct such a war successfully. I’m not prepared to advise them, though. And I think they’re not prepared to accept my advice.

Let’s move to the third part of the book, where you focus on the netherworlds of production. Echoing what we’ve been talking about now, much of your thesis hinges on what is now a fairly familiar refrain about the early 1970s witnessing a transformation in the labour processes and the forms of organising production, appropriation and consumption, and so forth. And, of course, you place keywords like ‘network’ and ‘immaterial’ labour at the heart of this transformation. On a purely empirical basis, and in so far as there are reliable statistics available, it seems that those proletarians employed in the information network, in information technology – in the immaterial dimensions of production that you talk about – are a minority. So, how can we extrapolate, from what is a minority of the proletariat, what might be the situation of the proletariat, let alone the global multitude you speak of?

Our argument is not that immaterial labour is dominant in quantitative terms, but in qualitative terms. The argument goes something like this: that, in each stage of economic history, there is a dominant sector in the economy that transforms the other sectors in such a way that they adopt its qualities. So that, in the same way that, with the industrial revolution, agriculture of course was dominant, quantitatively, but industry was dominant qualitatively – in the sense that agriculture was forced to industrialise, and adopt qualities that industrial production. Throughout the industrial revolution, all of society, including all forms of production, were coloured in a new light, I would say – they were brought within the orbit of industrial methods.

So the argument now, in the same way, is: even though immaterial forms of production are a minority in quantitative terms, and geographically specific, there is a tendency for them to transform other sectors of production. In other words, industrial production is becoming informationalised. Similarly, agriculture is becoming informationalised. For instance, in so far as genetic manipulation of seeds and plant varieties is all dependent on information. That’s one way in which information – here, genetic information – is transforming agricultural processes. Other ways that one might think of a kind of post-Fordism of agriculture would be in the movement away from massive and homogeneous production of agricultural commodities towards
specialisation markets, and a kind of flexibility of agricultural production. In any case, that’s the kind of thing that’s meant by this – that the dominance is qualitative in those terms, and therefore has a variety of effects.

The other thing to say, too, is that one shouldn’t think of immaterial labour, or immaterial production, as an exclusive, separate sector. Immaterial labour is almost always mixed with material forms of labour. And also – I should clarify – by ‘immaterial labour’, we don’t mean that the labouring process itself is immaterial; it of course involves bodies, and minds, but that the product is immaterial. But, when I think of immaterial forms of labour – for instance, examples that I often think of are flight attendants or healthcare workers, and fast-food workers. Those are three examples that often I like to use. All of them involve an immaterial component – in other words, creating a sense of well-being. Fast-food workers, are supposed to be ‘service with a smile’, so they seem to produce some kind of pleasure. But they’re obviously doing the real production, too – they’re flipping hamburgers, they’re changing bed-pans; flight attendants are giving pillows around . . .

One could, I think, make a very strong argument that these are actually throwbacks to the early stages of industrial capitalism, where it’s in fact absolute surplus-value which is dominant. In temporal terms, there’s a throwback, but even geographically there’s a throwback to very strategic decisions, on the part of capital, to exploit labour where the conditions are best presented – perhaps South Wales or South India. Despite your resistance to it, there’s a kind of teleology to your argument: that this immaterial economy is moving irreversibly to a different plane. Whereas, in terms of hours worked, in terms of conditions of employment, overtime and so forth, statistically, we seem to be closer to the early phases of capitalist industrialisation than to some new economy based on the productivity gains of say, information technology.

Toni and I are fascinated with this idea about immeasurability: there’s an immeasurable quality to this immaterial labour, which tends to deconstruct the contours of the working day; so that there’s a tendency to have life-time and work-time merge, so that one can almost not distinguish any longer between work-time and the time of life. And, in a way, you’re suggesting that is like a much more extreme form of the extraction of surplus-value than the delimited working days that were struggled for throughout the industrial era. That’s true. I mean, I think that there are resonances of that. I’m not sure if I see the use in thinking of it as a return, rather than something new – but we can come back to it again.
One thing I am finding interesting about this periodisation is trying, in fact, to line up to various theoretical frameworks — and I was thinking of Bob Brenner’s and Giovanni Arrighi’s, who both take the 1970s, more or less ’68 to ’73 (Arrighi always has very precise dates for these things), as a point of transfer, not, in a way, to pose it as a contest, as if they’re necessarily in disagreement with each other, but in a way to pose them as different approaches to the same problem, and try to line them up. We, too, are in a way posing that same period as the period of transition — but in ways that seem to me will share a lot of continuities with, at least, those two thinkers. I mean, there are probably others, in different realms, especially, the way Jameson thinks about postmodernism roughly in that same period, or other regulationists.

Of course, the difference with Brenner is that, despite the periodisation, he maintains the centrality of manufacturing and profitability in the present period, rather than stressing the transformation to immaterial labour. And, just polemically, on the last point: what bothered me about this section of the book was that, for a book that’s so iconoclastic and heterodox in so many other ways, there seemed to be a bit of a tangle into a kind of conformism of adopting wholesale categories from regulation theory, or from those types of theories — post-Fordism, I think ‘post-industrial’ is mentioned in passing at one stage — when these have been subject to enormous debate and controversy, which isn’t really alluded to, so that they’re taken for granted as describing the state of the world; counter-tendencies are underplayed. And also — I think this is something that has irked a lot of the Marxists that have read the book — empirically it seems to be the weakest aspect of the book. It doesn’t really try and sift through the evidence one way or the other. So, there’s something strange about that — about the way that you’re so keen to break with the orthodoxies in the rest of the book, but here, this is . . .

I don’t know if the regulation school is the left orthodoxy, and therefore Bob Brenner’s the iconoclast.

Yeah. It’s not history, the various rulers of the most powerful nations have wanted their economies to focus on the kinds production that generate the greatest value, and so they have tried to focus on such things, and to export industrial production to subordinated countries. That, of course, doesn’t, and
they don’t, mean that manufacturing is a thing of the past; they mean they hope that they can make manufacturing a thing of the past for their country, and make is something of the present for someone else’s country. But that’s in a different framework – that’s in a framework of, so to say, competing national interests.

For me, whether it’s orthodox or not doesn’t enter into it – it seems right, to me. It seems right to me that there has been a shift in the structure of domination, within the sectors of the economy, and that’s what our argument is. Now, that we don’t use data – I mean, there are two ways of responding. One is, you know, we’re not really trained in that way – we make arguments on a different descriptive level, and using others’ analyses of data. It’s not like data’s not important to me, but I’m not going to do original data here. The other way of responding is, the book’s damn long enough as it is. I respect people who do the work – it’s not that I have a disrespect for it; it seems to me it’s simply a different area of analysis, and, in some ways, we’re dependent on the various competing interpretations of these data.

Sure, but the point is that the thesis of the paradigm shift – of the shift from manufacturing to services as a qualitative change; the thesis of the immeasurability of value, of new forms of value, and the fact that the labour theory of value doesn’t apply in the same old way. All those things, for the last ten, fifteen years, have been a battlefield between Marxists and non-Marxists, about what exactly it is, in the world, that we are dealing with. And, in the section, you skate over this, and you present one side of the story, which – coincidentally or not – is the side of the story which seems to accord most with what the people who do defend the status quo and so on like to reproduce: that we are in this completely new phase, where knowledge is the most important thing; that old-style manufacturing is fated to disappear . . .

No, not fated to disappear: subordinated. That’s a very different thing. Subordinated within the structures of the economy; and, therefore, there’s a tendency for those labourers also to be subordinated, and that’s something that has to be recognised and dealt with. But one can’t just pretend that industrial production plays the same role that it played a hundred years ago.

Well, you see, what struck me particularly – the thing that sparked this off, really – was that, you have in France since the mid-1990s, a kind of rediscovery of the French working class – the industrial working class. You know, you had the Bourdieu book about the ‘weight of the world’; you had the ’95 events; and now
there’s the big book called New Spirit of Capitalism by Boltanski and Chiapello. And the thing that they constantly emphasise is that the disappearance of the industrial working class, from the political scene and from sociological discussions – of course, in part, it reflects objective processes in production in the proportion of the workforce. But it is as much to do with the fact that sociologists have chosen not, for example, to talk about them anymore.

I’d insist you keep misinterpreting what we’re saying. We’re not saying that there’s been any quantitative reduction – I mean, we don’t broach the question of quantitative division of the population in different sectors. So we’re not saying that the industrial working class has disappeared, or even lessened. We’re saying that it is now subordinated, in a way – precisely in the way that it used to be dominant; that industrial production at 1930 was the pinnacle of the global economic hierarchy, and that it, at the time – like I’m saying, metaphorically – coloured the various other kinds of production. Today that’s no longer the case. There might be as many, or more, or a few less industrial workers – I’m not making any claim about that. I’m saying, though, that industrial production is now subordinated; it’s no longer in the dominant position. That doesn’t mean that one shouldn’t pay attention to it: one should recognise its relative position. But, anyway, I feel outside of that debate and development you were talking about, which is that sociologists had ignored the industrial working class and have now rediscovered it. That seems to me all to the good. But what would be a problem, I would think, is if the industrial working class were rediscovered as if it were the same industrial working class that we had in 1960 or 1930.

Can I shift, in a kind of roundabout way – still within the passages of production – to the Soviet Union. Throughout your narrative, actually-existing socialism, historical Communism, whatever you want to call it, crops up occasionally. But the experience of the Soviet bloc and the People’s Republic of China is very muted in the narrative. . . . Is this deliberate – particularly in terms of the Constitution of Empire? Because, again, returning to the notion of dialectical change, and to paradigm shifts and so forth, there is one reading of twentieth-century history that suggest the twentieth century was the age of extremes where the US-led Constitution of Empire might be explained as product of the existence of a counter-Empire, if you like, in the form of historical Communism.

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8 Boltanski and Chiapello 1999.
Right. And which goes often together with a notion of totalitarianism that puts together Nazi and Soviet [systems] as, not only parallel, but actually, functionally coherent. And we’re consciously arguing against such notions, which is that our claim is that US constitutional history and US social history – during the twentieth century at least, and probably the nineteenth, too – provided the primary ground on which the Constitution of Empire was developed. In other words, it seems to me that the notion of US imperialism, that still functions quite a lot, essentially reads its genealogy as the European nation-states who were defeated by anticolonial struggles now passed on their form to the United States, and that’s the genealogy.

Ours goes rather different, which is that, after a certain initial construction in Europe during the modern period, that the different elements of the US constitution identified better some of the aspects of [the contemporary situation] and therefore are a more appropriate genealogy. The notion of open frontiers, of expandable space, of hybrid identities, etc. – these were things that were primarily worked out on US terrain, and now, at least conceptually, play important roles in our notion of Empire. The Soviets and the Chinese don’t provide the development of that form of power. The Cold War plays a certain role in our genealogy, but not the Soviet experience as a form of power. It seems to us, in a way, that the Soviet experience as a form of power – not as a liberation project, because the Soviet experience, of course, is a combination of those two – the form of power of the Soviet state doesn’t seem, to me at least, terribly innovative. The Soviet creative experience does – but these are different matters.

Okay, but to put it more sharply, is it not the case that the modes of power, the modes of rule – be they the ‘society of discipline’, ‘society of control’; be it the development of immaterial labour, or Empire as you’ve defined it – are all in a way reactions to the existence of a Soviet bloc, or the experience of historical Communism more broadly?

It seems to me that there are two ways in which the Cold War functions in terms of sovereignty, and one of them, in a way, was looking forward, and one of them was looking backward. In so far as the bipolar split of US-Soviet division of the globe functioned as the confrontation of essentially sovereign nation-states, that seems to me a repetition of, in a way, the contest for power that the European nation-states had conducted previously. And, in sometimes mirroring fashions, but in a way there were resemblances, certainly, between the scramble for Africa in the nineteenth century and the scramble for Africa.
and the Third World between the two superpowers. This seems to me the result of looking backward.

There’s another way, though, in which the Cold War appeared – certainly in Western Europe and the United States – as not the facing of a sovereign power and another nation-state, but of an ungraspable and unlocalisable enemy. Because it wasn’t just an external enemy, it wasn’t just the Soviet Union – it was communism, internally and externally. So that could generate a kind of hysteria on the part of power, on the part of the Western European nation-states and the US; and also showed the fundamental inadequacy, I think, of the older form of power, confronting such an unlocalisable enemy. This seems to me the kind of aspect of the Cold War that in fact looked forward to new confrontations. In fact, one might say that that moment of 1950s hysteria looks a little bit like this contemporary war on terrorism. Because the terrorist could be anyone, it could be anywhere. So there’s that unlocalisability of the enemy, and either the network structure of the enemy, or at least unknowability, poses a fundamental challenge to sovereign power.

I suppose one of the obvious things – and this has been covered in some of the media interviews that you’ve had – is the remarkable coincidence of the publication of Empire with the anti-globalisation protests. Do you feel in any way that the ‘multitude’ you speak of in the book is represented in Seattle, in Genoa, in Gothenburg? And, if so, do you personally – or you and Toni – have any particular political affiliations to groups that claim you, as it were – Ya Basta! or Tute Bianche?

It seems to me there are two fundamental ways in which these various movements do correspond to things that Toni and I were trying to think. One is that they are not fundamentally anti-American struggles, that they’ve been aimed at either an international, G8, or supranational forms of power, and that this is something fundamentally new. But I would also say that I see each of these targets as inadequate. In my view, for instance, if we were to destroy the IMF next week, it’s not going to make the world better, either immediately or in the long term. The IMF itself is not the enemy, it’s part of a network of it.

What I see the movements as doing, then, is recognising that there isn’t a specific source of power that can be attacked once and for all; that power itself is unlocalisable. And I see these various tactics as experimenting in confronting forms of power. So that, even with the recognition that the IMF is not the source of our problems, attacking it is a good first approximation.
That’s the way I see it. On the other side, the other thing that I think is extremely positive about these movements is the non-hierarchical structure, and the functioning of a multiplicity of groups. These are of course, also, relative because I think there are plenty of hierarchies and conflicts to criticise, within those movements. Since Seattle, it really hasn’t been resolved. I don’t think anyone really understands how it is that groups that we thought, previously, fundamentally antagonistic, could function together.

And it’s not through, it seems to me, the previous notion that we carried through the 1980s, and I guess the 1990s, [namely] that coalition was the answer. I think this is not a coalition; I think it’s a different form of organisation, or it’s the possibility of a different form of organisation, that can function in common with the real differences of the groups. In other words, groups don’t have to give up their differences in order to function in common. In any case, those are two aspects in which I welcome, in particular, the historical development – celebrate, even. But then it would make no sense to call them representative of the multitude. In fact, the notion of the multitude is anti-representation, and specifically in this sense: if one were to think that these movements were to be speaking for those who are suffering from globalisation – the ones who are working in sweatshops in the Philippines, etc. – if they’re speaking for them, that’s exactly what I’m opposed to. So that’s why, when we were talking earlier about the urgency or necessity of this expansion, so that it isn’t a movement that’s speaking for others but speaking with others, if that kind of language works, it would be that kind of thing that would make the movements a better approximation of what could be meant by ‘the multitude’.

Tute Bianche was a wonderful thing, in the beginning especially. I mean, it was born as a movement of immaterial labour, and so that’s what the whiteness means . . . they were supposed to be the invisible workers; whereas the blue [was what] the auto factory workers wore, or the red ones . . . so this was the white ones. And it was essentially, in the beginning, not immaterial labour in general, but [what] were called in Italy ‘precarious workers’, mostly in the media. Toni more than me, but I too have personal relationships to many of the people involved in Tute Bianche and in Ya Basta! So, I don’t know what counts for endorsement.

In relation to these questions of organisation and tactics, what do you think is now the distinctive difference between the communism that you argue for and anarchism?
There’s a passage in the book where you say ‘We are not anarchists’. What do you think still remains of the traditional distinction between Marxism and anarchism?

The question of organisation is the primary one. But then, you see, part of the confusion is that there are so many things meant by ‘anarchism’. And, particularly in the US, there’s a great resurgence of anarchism, at least as a label, which, as far as I can tell, generally means refusal of authority; and, therefore, a desire for democratic and autonomous relationships. Although it’s not an individualist anarchism, the most important difference, it seems to me, especially in the kind of discussion we’re having, is the need for organisation. And if then an anarchist responds, ‘Well, we also see the need for organisation, but our forms of organisation’ – well, I’d say, OK, that’s fine. I can’t satisfactorily replay the Marx-Bakunin thing, and put it onto these contemporary things – it doesn’t seem to fit, to me.

There are theoretical issues, are there not, that are distinctively Marxist and less distinctively anarchist, or less able to be absorbed? There is still the question, for example, about transition. A Marxist or a communist would still argue that you cannot abolish the state, for example; you cannot abolish the market; you cannot abolish Empire – that you have to engage in a struggle which can be a more-or-less long struggle, where you try and replace those forms of social relations with other forms of social relations, and that the outcome is not given in advance, that you need ideological clarity, that you need, perhaps, organisation – appropriate organisational forms, and so on – and that therefore you posit the need for a transitional period, a transitional process. Whereas an anarchist, generally, would see that as a kind of special pleading for a new form of authority, a new form of state, a new form of oppression, and that that should be rejected in favour of pure negation.

It sounds like you’re replaying ‘state and revolution’ argument, there. I agree with the anarchists that the state should be abolished – it’s just they think it should be abolished on the day after the revolution. And, yes, I agree with the social democrats, that they think there needs to be some new state form, but it needs to wither away in time. I don’t recognise myself and the anarchists I’m engaged with in that division.
vis-à-vis the international and financial institutions, for example, are re-emerging. The question that was posed in Genoa, for example, about the relationship between the movement and the organised working class, the trade unions. These old classical questions that, supposedly, should be in the dustbin because we’re in a new phase . . .

Why should someone say that supposedly they should be in the dustbin?

Well, there are some readings that claim that they are irretrievably lost, the old questions of revolutionary strategy and tactics, which is something you write in the book. They’ve actually re-emerged, so there’s as much continuity as there is discontinuity.

Sure. Historical changes are never absolute. Those specific ones you were talking about do seem to me perfectly relevant in these globalisation struggles.

If there’s an unmediated relationship between capitalism and the multitudes, the question of the trade unions, for example, seems to be out of the window, because these are archaic formations that are being swept aside by new processes, and anyway represent corporatist and sectional interests, and therefore the whole question about how you relate to them shouldn’t be that prominent, if that’s the view.

Right. The general thing is, I think you’re applying a slogan a little too absolutely. But that doesn’t mean there aren’t many things to criticise within the history of the trade-union movement, but to say that there is no use in the organisation of labour, or that there is nothing good to say from the traditional labour unions – I wouldn’t say either of those. It’s not exactly the same thing, but I was in a discussion with Giovanni Arrighi about two weeks ago, and he was trying to pose it like we were accusing him of a paradigm that just repeated the old, as if, you know, every damn cycle was always the same thing, which is a dominant tendency in his work. And we were just insisting on the new, as if it had no relationship with what went before. Now, neither of those is obviously true. I mean, there is perhaps a different emphasis, you know, that one wants to insist on the elements that are new, or the ways that things have changed. But, like I say, historical changes don’t happen that way – you can’t just leave things behind, and, in many ways, one doesn’t want to.

Interview conducted by Sebastian Budgen and Alejandro Colás in London on 26 October 2001.
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