

Power within a Global Paradigm: Prof. Michael Hardt Speaks in Olin  
Interview with Michael Hardt  
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Last Tuesday, Michael Hardt, Associate Professor in the Literature Program at Duke University, gave a talk sponsored by the Human Rights program at Bard College. Michael Hardt co-authored with Italian researcher and writer Antonio Negri a recent book entitled *Empire*, which radically rethinks power within a global paradigm. Touted as the Das Capital of the internet age, *Empire* has quickly risen to the forefront of the discourse on globalization. Hardt and Negri argue that, while a certain anti-humanist critique is crucial to understanding our contemporary condition, the ascendance of supranational forms of power necessitate a rethinking and revitalization of the categories humanism and democracy, a humanism beyond humanism and a democracy beyond the nation-state, toward a strategy of global resistance and change. The following is an interview with Michael Hardt after his talk at Bard.

FP: In your book *Empire*, you both draw from and are critical of a certain anti-humanist tradition on the Left, including forms of deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and post-colonial theory. What is it about the problem of supranational sovereignty that calls for a robust new humanism beyond these anti-humanisms? What are some important ways that this new humanism differs from the old one?

MH: Humanism has meant different things. Within the tradition of western philosophy, there are two things that are meant by humanism. Renaissance humanism, especially in Italy, was primarily a project of secularization. In other words, it was a denial of extra-worldly source of order. The world had the capacity to determine itself. The political form that comes out of this is one where humans are believed to be able to construct new forms of government or new forms of society. The denial of divine order is one aspect of this conception of humanism.

It's a different humanism though, that the mid-twentieth century anti-humanisms had as their object. That humanism was the separation of the human from nature as a whole. I trace this to Spinoza but one also finds it, as you mentioned, in many French philosophical figures of the 1950's and 1960's; Lacan, Foucault, Althusser. The object of this anti-humanism is the assumption that the human nature is different from nature as a whole. This privileging or separation of the human is what it is being objected to. I think that that objection can go perfectly in hand with the other humanism.

If one poses two humanisms in this way, then a certain humanism and a certain

anti-humanism can actually function without contradiction. I see in the work of Foucault both an anti-humanist project, articulated most clearly in his earlier work, in for instance *The Order of Things*, and then in his later work, a humanist project in the sense of a construction of the self, possibilities of the creation of the world, using as the point of departure processes of subjectivity. I see the two as coherent rather than contradictory.

FP: For many people in the eastern bloc, the word communism has a very different meaning than it does in your book. How would you re-signify 'communism' for people in the emerging democracies of the eastern Europe?

MH: I'm not sure they are emerging democracies. There's always a political decision or a historical political judgement involved in the choice of concepts or the maintenance of terms. Take humanism, for example. It's an interesting question whether one maintains a discourse on humanism given how many different things it has meant. It is a similar case with the concept and the term 'communism'. All of these traditions have varied pasts. By maintaining a term one doesn't necessarily maintain all of the ways it has been used.

In many cases I would be happy to use the term 'absolute democracy,' instead of communism, but there are many things that are specific to the communist tradition that seem to me extremely important and useful. One is a critique of private property, or an insistence that private property is an obstacle to democracy. This is common to both the communist and anarchist traditions but it's not always included in conceptions of democracy. There are many things that were meant by communism in the eastern bloc countries. If, in that context, one were to judge that the term has too many connotations that are contrary to our project, then one abandons it. One has always to do that with terms.

FP: In your talk, you described the difference between molar and molecular kinds of social collectivity. What do these two forms mean in relation to supranational sovereignty. How is it that the molecular, in your words, "touches closer to reality?"

MH: There are many different ways of approaching your question. In the field of international relations and in general in the political sciences' considerations of globalization in the form of internationalization there has been for the last fifty years or so a dominant realist school that sees nation states as the primary actors. This is an excellent example of a molar account of social history. The realist school doesn't exactly think that the nations states are the only actors, but that they should always be given a primary place in recognizing international dynamics, so that non-state actors, sub-state actors, and even super-state actors, are secondary at best in considerations.

Such a view, either this conventional realist view or other molar views of global dynamics that substitute, say, for nation states other large aggregate actors, is

extremely limited in recognizing the dynamic that is happening today. To best understand the contemporary processes of globalization one has to look at much more varied and multiple processes that do not operate through large aggregate or molar actors.

Let me give some examples, then, of what we mean by molecular dynamics. One might try to consider social subjectivities that are linked in networks rather than in stable and centered institutions. Flows of migration often function through dispersed networks. Diaspora studies in general are ways of recognizing molecular histories. These should be given priority because they seem to be the most determining factors in contemporary tendencies of global order.

FP: In your talk, you suggested that September 11 was not truly exceptional but rather a symptom of a kind of ongoing global Civil War, that revealed "the inadequacy of any substantialist notion of sovereignty." Could you elaborate on this point?

MH: Let me start with the substantialist notion of sovereignty. This, again, is a tradition within European political philosophy. The substantialist notion of sovereignty sees the sovereign as power in itself. Early theories of monarchy were generally of the substantialist notion. The monarchical power acts on its own, has power in itself. We're arguing a much more accurate conception of sovereignty in general, and then, specifically today, to see sovereignty as a relationship between the ruler in the ruled that involves the consent of the ruled as much as the power of the ruler.

One political advantage of this conception is that it leaves sovereign power open always to its contestation. If sovereignty depends as much on the consent of the ruled as the power of the ruler, then first of all that consent could be refused. This grants a power to the ruled and makes the relationship of sovereignty itself always open to civil war, insurrection, refusal. The relational conception of sovereignty seems better analytically to a substantialist one. It also seems preferable politically because it indicates possibilities for political struggle, for the overturning of the present form of sovereignty or even perhaps sovereignty as such.

FP: How does September 11 relate to this?

MH: One of the things that September 11 revealed, although it did not create, is that the United States is not separate from the rest of the world, that it operates under the same conditions or really within the same political reality as the rest of the world. If one were to think of the U.S. as sovereign, one would have to think of it as being able to secure its domestic territory from external influences, and be able to exert its authority elsewhere.

September 11 revealed that the US is not separate; it doesn't operate under different conditions but participates in a much larger global system. The tendency toward unilateral actions on the part of the us, both in military operations and in economic and other political fronts, misunderstands this relationship, assuming that the U.S. can act as a sovereign power when in fact it cannot. A corollary of the notion of sovereignty as a continually contested relationship is that there is always the potential for conflict within the sovereign space. Conflict within the sovereign space is traditionally called civil war. The difficulty with this concept in our recent usage is that we've thought civil war only within the national space. Now we have to think what civil war means in a global sovereign space.

FP: You suggested that there is a potential for the conditions of global civil war to turn over into a struggle for liberation. In response to this, Thomas Keenan asked if this turn meant taking sides in the current conflict. Could you explain your answer again?

MH: There's no guarantee that civil wars within sovereign space will have liberatory potential. It seems to me that over the past decade at least, at least since the Gulf War, we've been faced with what amounts to struggle to rearrange the hierarchies of global power. We've had the most powerful forces in the world struggling with some of the lesser dominating forces in the world. In each of these conflicts, both sides have claimed either to represent the poor of the world or to represent justice and peace. It seems to me that neither side in any of these conflicts has in fact done so. They have rather been civil wars among the powerful.

I view the present conflict this way. If there really are two forces in conflict, let's imagine that the present conflict is between the US or a US led coalition against Al Qaeda or a nebulous terrorist network, I don't mean to say that these two forces are morally equivalent, but that neither of them holds liberatory potential. In such a conflict, I have no interest in taking one side or the other.

What interests me, rather, is the possibility of a conflict that would overturn rather than reorganize the hierarchical structures of global order, a struggle that would lead toward the equality of wealth and power in the world and the democratization of relationships. The slogan would be to transform civil wars among the powerful into a liberation struggle of the disempowered. I'm not sure how to do that. But this seems like the positive way of viewing our contemporary condition. Because the alternative is to sit on the sidelines and suffer useless conflicts among the powerful.