Adventures of the Multitude: Response of the Authors

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When writing *Empire* we were keenly aware of the difficulties and limitations of presenting a global framework or paradigm for understanding power in the contemporary world. Any such attempt will necessarily be insufficient to the task, if only for the limited knowledges of its authors. It is impossible for any text to account adequately for all the real differences that characterize our various social contexts: geographical differences, racial differences, gender differences, and so forth. We think nonetheless that such attempts can play an important role in pushing knowledge and debate forward by striving to think the common framework within which these various differences act and exist. Such global theory need not ignore difference. One important aspect that characterizes Empire as a form of rule, in fact, is its capacity to rule through differences, hybrid identities, and flexible boundaries. A global theory of Empire is thus not a negation of differences but an attempt to think the framework of power that organizes and exploits our differences.

Recognizing the necessary limitations of our work, we thought that perhaps as useful as our text itself would be the critiques and controversies it inspires. Ours is the kind of book that asks to be criticized. The quality of the criticism provoked is perhaps, in fact, a good gauge for the value of any book, but even more so in our case. We are thus very grateful to *Rethinking Marxism* and to the authors who have written in this issue for illuminating our blind spots, highlighting our limitations, and casting our arguments in new contexts.
For this reason we are not inclined to respond to the various authors by defending ourselves or our arguments. Our inclination is rather to take up their criticisms and push them further in the interest of advancing the project as a whole. Ours is already a collective project—not just the two of us, but also the circles of friends and colleagues with whom we work and think. Our interest is to extend the breadth of the project further. We will thus take this opportunity to reflect on some of the new directions indicated by our commentators.

Marxist Manifesto

Slavoj Žižek is a wonderful polemicist and he makes an astute observation saying that our *Empire* is a *pre*-Marxist work. When he says this we are reminded of the old “break” that Althusser posed between the spontaneous practice of communism (*pre*) and Theory as the practice of the Party (*post*). In one sense, then, we have not come out of the “critical break”: we are still inside it—that is, still in the period of transition. We are no longer in one phase but not yet in the other. We should clarify, however, that we certainly have no desire either to reconstruct the Party or to create a global and coherent theory that would be able to support the practice of the Party. We, in *Empire*, live entirely within the ambiguity of a determinate period of transition, one that is bounded on one side by the world of nation-states and imperialisms, a world of national capitalisms and fascisms and, on the other, by a world that goes beyond them; this is the passage from the cold war to the imperial organization of the world. The ambiguity of this condition—no longer but not yet—is what interests us. The ambiguity of this passage is the context in which our concepts and definitions need to be made and unmade. By confronting this overturning of the world a new paradigm, an imperial paradigm, must emerge. Our problem in *Empire* was therefore to deepen communist theory or, rather, to write a new chapter of *Das Capital*, a chapter that Marx could not write because the world that he analyzed did not allow him. In this sense, we are not *pre*-Marxists, but rather *post*—because we live in a new world, and we try to analyze this novelty. Our research is completely *post*-Marxist because, in the first place, we believe that the Marxian thematic of the industrial working-class subject has been surpassed—even though we develop the conception of exploitation, analyze its extension in time and space, and so forth. We search for new bases for the will to revolt, the will to a form a counterpower. In this sense our *Empire* is beyond Marx, as are the numerous attempts to make Marxism adequate to the new adventures of revolution. Žižek is right to repropose the contemporary relevance of Lenin in the refoundation of Marxism for our times. Our book is aimed at responding to this same need.

Many of the authors in this volume have certainly realized that this is the goal of our work. Whether they criticize us for not having successfully extended the analyses of *Das Capital* (as do, for various reasons, Cox, Resnick and Wolff, and Hutnyk) or whether instead they appreciate our attempts to reopen new spaces and formulate
new methodologies for the critique of capital (as do Beasley-Murray, Murphy, Read, Galloway, Villalobos-Ruminott, and Monti), all the authors understand that the effort here is not simply to outline the bases for an updated phenomenology of capitalist development through analyses of the institutional figures that represent it. The point is to identify new forms of contradiction and to test their intensity and extension. We thus consider *Empire* a Marxist work in a “revisionist” sense that is not conservative—outside every static, orthodox, talmudic memory, but within the pleasure of confronting the old texts of Marx with the new practices of the multitudes and allowing this situation to unsettle our thinking. The “break” is everywhere and we are inside it.

We entirely agree with Žižek therefore that *Empire* is not a communist manifesto. A manifesto must pose a determinate social subject together with an adequate form of political organization. Our analysis (and also our historical situation) has not yet arrived at that level. Some lament in a more general way that *Empire* provides no clear program or guide for political action, but in our view this is not a shortcoming of the book but rather an indication of its prudence. Political practice is better suited than theory to answer certain questions. New forms of political organization are being developed today and theoretical projects should be sensitive to their powers of invention.

**The Multitude inside Empire**

Many of these essays present an objection that is much more important than any of this discussion of pre- or post-Marxism, and that is that our book does not provide a strong enough figure for the multitude, one that is able to support the legacy of the “revolutionary vocation of the proletariat.” Mutman and Levinson, for example, question the reality of the multitude and its capacity to serve as a revolutionary subject. We should point out, however, that our theorizing of the multitude up to this point has remained abstract but is nonetheless a necessary response that corresponds to a real condition. One can consider the multitude in the first instance as a logical hypothesis that follows from our analysis of the economic, political, and cultural structures of Empire. Along with our analysis of the contemporary forms of power, then, we have to develop the analyses of classes and their composition, contradictions and crises, the will to escape the yoke of capital and to express the power of liberation. This is a first step in an analysis of the multitude as a revolutionary subject.

The global condition of the multitude follows in part from our conception of Empire itself. Our contention, expressed most generally, is that Empire is a global form of sovereignty that includes within its constitution supranational organization, national structures (including nation-states), and local or regional organisms. In other words, our notion of Empire does not indicate an end of the nation-state. Nation-states remain extremely important but their functions have been transformed *within* the order of Empire. At the highest level, one could say that only Empire (and no longer any nation-state) is capable of sovereignty in a full sense.
The primary objection in some of the essays with regard to this notion of imperial sovereignty has to do with the centrality or not of the United States as nation-state in the imperial global order. This can refer (negatively) to our claim that it is inaccurate to conceive contemporary global order in terms of U.S. imperialism or (positively) to our notion of the genealogy of the imperial constitutional figure that has developed primarily through U.S. constitutional history. The former, however, our argument against the notion of U.S. imperialism, has inspired the most criticism both from the authors in this collection and others. This is clearly a delicate issue for the Left in many parts of the world. One way of understanding our hypothesis is to look at it from the perspective of capital and the critique of capital: capital has globalized the system of sovereignty without identifying itself with any single nation-state. The imperial power of capital is exercised on the basis of a “non place.” In other words, there is no center of imperial power and equally no outside to imperial power. It is interesting that this proposition is difficult to understand for political thinkers on the Left and the Right, whereas from the standpoint of any stock exchange or from the offices of any multinational corporation it is clear that capital has no country and in fact resists the control of nation-states.

To say that imperial sovereignty is global and that it has no outside does not mean in any way that conditions across the world have become the same or even tend toward homogeneity. The passage to Empire does indeed lessen some differences but it creates and magnifies others. Our world is just as uneven and hierarchical as the imperialist world was, but its lines of division cannot be adequately conceived along national boundaries. Perhaps we should say that our maps of global inequalities need to become much more complex. The concept of Empire does imply, however, that despite these differences we all share the common condition of being inside Empire. Even those regions that are sometimes thought to be excluded from the circuits of global capital (sub-Saharan Africa is often cited) are clearly inside when considered, for instance, from the perspective of debt. We are all within the domain of imperial control. Being inside is the common condition of Empire.

One consequence of this conception of global Empire is that it undermines the foundation of the concept of the people. In the modern tradition, the people (whether democratic or not) is founded on the nation and a real or imagined national sovereignty. As national sovereignty declines and the bounded national space dissolves, the people becomes unthinkable. What does it mean in our contemporary situation to pose the problem of a new subject that is not a people but is rather a multitude? Conceptually the difference should be clear: the notion of the people organizes the population into a bounded unity whereas the multitude conceives the population as an unbounded multiplicity. In *Empire* we allude to a variety of multitudes: the multitude in exodus, the multitude of barbarians, the multitude of the poor, and so forth. Some political consequences of these conceptions of the multitude are already clear. It is clear, for example, that we must move beyond the discourse of “the class that is made into a people” in which differences are made generic. This discourse has been hegemonic throughout the modern history of socialism and communism, but such a
strategy will no longer work and is no longer desirable (if in fact it ever was). The multitude will not be made into a people. It is not a class properly speaking, despite the fact that it does contain, within its multiplicity, all the characteristics of the working class, the stigmata of exploitation, misery, and alienation. We must thus move beyond the discourse of the working class as people because it is no longer valid analytically or politically and we must abandon all nostalgia for that revolutionary figure. We must maintain, however, its amplitude, its powers, its will to resist exploitation, its spirit of revolt against the capitalist state, and its inventive force applied to the constitution of a future.

Where and who is this multitude, this new revolutionary subject? A host of authors—Ansaldi, Bamyeh, Cox, Ludner, Moreiras, and Hutnyk among them—pose this question. This is indeed the right question to ask. What characterizes the real existence of the multitude today and what elements could help constitute it as a political subject?

The Hegemony of Immaterial Labor

One of our strategies for understanding the real existence of the multitude has been to look at the contemporary forms and divisions of labor. Labor defines, in many respects, the existence and potential of the multitude. Some authors, however, Nick Dyer-Witheford among them, claim that we cannot succeed in identifying the subjectivity of the multitude because we center our analysis on the immateriality of productive labor. What is at stake here is our claim of the hegemonic position in the contemporary economy of immaterial labor, in which we included knowledge and information production, symbolic and analytical tasks, services, and affective labor—in short, all forms of labor (corporeal and intellectual) that produce immaterial goods. Marx explains this notion of a hegemonic form of production very clearly. (Marx is referring in this passage to the hegemony of capital itself but the notion is equally applicable to our case). “In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it” (1973, 106–7). Our claim, then, is that immaterial labor has become predominant, not in quantitative but in qualitative terms. The various material forms of labor are bathed in the light of immaterial labor and thereby transformed. It is important to point out here that immaterial labor is not limited, however, to certain isolated segments of the economy. There is a tendency for immaterial elements to be introduced and highlighted in all forms of production. Just as in the industrial era there was a tendency for agriculture and society itself to be industrialized, so too today there is a tendency for all forms of production to be informationalized, immaterialized. It is impossible to imagine Empire without immaterial productivity at its center—either from the perspective of the productivity of
the system or, and this interests us more, from the standpoint of revolt and the alternatives to imperial power. Production, communication, the capacities for enjoyment and pleasure—all this is organized by a common intellectuality and affectivity that raises the quotient of humanity of every single subject of Empire. The individual worker is not the one who produces this system nor is the individual worker the one who will bring it down. The active subjects in the construction and hence too the destruction of this system of power are rather all the collective figures that are born of the socialization and intellectualization of labor. It is in this sense that we see the analysis of the forms and hierarchies of labor as important in the project to grasp the real existence of the multitude.

Some authors object, however, that by positioning the analysis of immaterial labor at the center of the discussion of revolution in this way, we undervalue the potential of those who labor in the subordinated regions of the world and those who suffer in peripheral conditions of exploitation. By privileging the hegemonic forms and figures of labor at the center of the productive machine, these authors continue, we are still using a Eurocentric model of civilization. Rabasa, Moore, and Hutnyk are among those who raise this critique of both immaterial labor and the Eurocentrism that this implies. This is an important issue. We should point out, first of all, that, although all our political thinking should be formulated in the light of the analyses of labor and production, the hierarchy among forms of labor within the capitalist economy does not necessarily translate into a hierarchy among the laboring subjects in revolt. The forms and relations of revolt are ultimately questions for political organization and strategy.

We should note, second, that to a certain extent the recent transformations of labor and production have tended to destroy the separate conditions of the production of value. Some of the authors, such as Mishra, Surin, and Moore, object that no such unification has taken place and that the North and the South of the globe remain importantly different. They are certainly right to insist on the fact that the conditions of workers have not become homogeneous, but our point is slightly different. Our point is not that there are no longer dominant and subordinate regions of the world but rather that their spatial relation has changed, that they are now one within the other, and they continue to become more so. The internalization of the “outside” seems to us the fundamental characteristic of the becoming of imperial globaliza
tion. This internalization, we should repeat, does not mean in any way a flattening, neutralization, or homogenization of the different conditions of labor, wages, or life of the proletariat. It does not represent an attenuation but rather an intensification of exploitation. Postcolonial studies have perhaps best demonstrated this process of internalization and from this perspective the lack of an “outside” becomes dramatic in several respects. Above all, as Bamyeh points out, it makes difficult the search for an “other place” or an other standpoint from which critique would be possible except the “non place” in which labor, exploitation, and power intersect.

Nowhere to go! Many of the authors, Bamyeh and Szeman come to mind, seem to understand clearly this difficult condition. Add to this difficulty the fact of the
crisis of communication among struggles—that is, the fact that struggles no longer communicate with one another and that consequently the figure of a cycle of struggles has tended to disappear—and we can see that “nowhere to go” is our defining condition. We must understand, however, that the condition of the “non place” is an eminently corporeal condition. Empire is a biopolitical reality. We tried in Empire to outline this framework—of the co-presence and the cooperation of bodies, of the virtuality and the unbounded nature of their power—and we tried to demonstrate how our intellectual, corporeal, and affective powers could become the subject of life. The “non place” should be read, lived, and transformed from this point of view—that is, on the basis of its corporeality, its biopolitical nature. This is one of the directions we have been working on since completing Empire.

The Power of Decision of the Multitude

The discourse of the multitude also must be developed with respect to its power for common political action. Earlier we emphasized the multiplicity of the concept of the multitude in contrast to the people, which tends to reduce multiplicity to unity. Now we must focus on the other aspect of the multitude—that is, how it is distinguished from the fundamentally passive conceptions of collective political subjectivity, such as the mob, the crowd, or the masses. How can the multitude make a “decision” and make itself a determinate force of transformation? (We are again indebted to Slavoj Žižek for the reformulation of this question in Leninist terms.) We should point out that this question itself goes against some of the fundamental assumptions of modern European political theory. According to that tradition only the one can decide and only a unity can act coherently; multiplicities are necessarily passive and incoherent. This is a basic axiom of the modern theory of sovereignty. We need to think, on the contrary, how the multitude, without denying its multiplicity, can take a decision and act effectively. We need to develop a political theory without sovereignty.

Our point of departure for beginning to address this question is the real transformative actions of the multitude. Three fundamental elements constitute the actions of the multitude: resistance, insurrection, and constituent power, or really, if one does not want to be so theoretical, micropolitical practices of insubordination and sabotage, collective instances of revolt, and finally utopian and alternative projects. These are the capacities of the multitude that are real and constantly present. Our hypothesis, then, is that in order for the multitude to act as a subject these three elements must coincide in a coherent project of counterpower. We need to discover a way that every micropolitical expression of resistance pushes on all the stages of the revolutionary process; we need to create a situation in which every act of insubordination is intimately linked to a project of collective revolt and the creation of a real political alternative. How can this be created, however, and who will organize it?
The obvious temptation here is to repeat, with regard to the multitude, the operation that (in his time) Rousseau operated on bourgeois society to make it into a political body. This is just the temptation, however, that we need to recognize and avoid, because for us the path leads in the opposite direction. It is not true that there can be no multiple agent without being unified. We have to overturn that line of reasoning: the multitude is not and will never be a single social body. On the contrary, every body is a multitude of forces, subjects, and other multitudes. These multitudes assume power (and thus are capable of exercising counterpower) to the extent that they are enriched through this common productivity, that they are transformed through the force of invention they express, that they reveal and radically remake, through a practices of commonality and mixture, their own multiple bodies. Self-valorization, revolution, and constitution: these become here the components of the capacity of decision of the multitude—a multitude of bodies that decides.

How can all this be organized? Or better, how can it adopt an organizational figure? How can we give to these movements of the multitude of bodies, which we recognize are real, a power of expression that can be shared? We still do not know how to respond to these questions. In the future, perhaps, we will have accumulated enough new experiences of struggle, movement, and reflection to allow us to address and surpass these difficulties—constituting not a new body but a multiplicity of bodies that come together, commonly, in action. We would like that the critiques of our book, *Empire*, be directed toward this incapacity of ours to give a complete response to these (and other) questions. We hoped that in writing *Empire* we would provide an argument that would stimulate debate. Risking being wrong is better than remaining silent. Ours is, after all, part of a collective project of all those who really think that the revolution of this world and the transformation of human nature are both necessary and possible.

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References
