06 2006

Translating democracy

Social-multitudinarian resistance and radical democracy in the Empire

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In their theoretical cult book *Empire*, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt described how the nation-state, in the postmodern mutation process of sovereignty that they design by the name of Empire, looses its sovereignty, but only to take up another function within the Imperial constitutionalisation process. Within Empire as the new global sovereign, nation-states have become filters. The differences that follow from the territorial limitations of nation-states are subject of economic and financial speculations. Nation-states are forced to compete with one another as more or less interesting locations for economic and financial activities.[i] Their differences have an effect on the localisation and delocalisation politics of capitalists, but also on the migration politics of the multitude. Every national 'politique politicienne' articulates itself within the Imperial framework on both these politics of mobility. The filter function of the nation-state within Empire presupposes that the mobility of goods, services, capital and persons is regulated. Or to say it differently: politics becomes 'politique politicienne', if it cannot think the nation-state as anything else but as a filter within the broader Imperial framework.

As ‘politique politicienne’, politics doesn’t question the way in which the Imperial apparatus functions as such, it only aspires that its filter will be as well off as possible. Both a liberal-democratic and a social-democratic ‘politique politicienne’ articulate themselves on the filter function of the nation-state. However, it seems important to me that both liberal-democrats and social democrats would try to translate the deeper philosophical convictions that underlie their respective ideologies into the new global predicament of Empire.

The otherglobalists should present themselves as the liberal consciousness of the liberal-democrats, the social consciousness of the social democrats, and — why not — the Christian consciousness of the Christian-democrats. They constantly should point out the contradictions in their respective discourses. Thus the real horror for the liberal-democrat paradoxically seems to be that one would draw the one and only possible conclusion from the ‘territorial contradiction’ of capitalist liberal democracy, namely that the world itself, the global territory that is covered by capitalism, should be organised politically as a liberal democracy.

The fact that this preeminently liberal conclusion is a specter for liberal democrats, is not so much the consequence of pragmatic scepsis about the scale of this political operation (the specter of a world-state as a cold mega bureaucracy) or about the feasibility of it (the resistance that globalisation of democracy would face in non-democratic countries), but the consequence of the formal liberal-democratic implications of it. The true horror of the western liberal-democrat is the realisation of liberal democracy. Every world citizen would enjoy formal political equality, and as a consequence Indian, Chinese, and African voters would weigh heavily on world politics. The prospect of a third world alliance that on the stage of a democratically organised world politics could break up western

hegemony, makes liberal-democrats conclude that world democracy sure is a beautiful dream, but totally unrealistic. The truth is that world democracy is probably realistic, but that it is a nightmare for western liberals that want to consolidate their power position.

Precisely at the moment that the liberal-democratic mechanism of representation, if it were adopted on a global scale, could put a check on a number of disastrous capitalist developments, it also seems to have lost all credibility among western progressive democrats. There are, to be sure, numerous reasons why representative democracy lost progressive credibility. But it seems a strategic mistake to abandon the idea of representative democracy altogether precisely at the moment that it presents itself as a chance to break up American hegemony within Empire. The importance of the United States within the Imperial constitution is at odds with the basic principles of representative democracy. In an outrageous manner, a nation-state with about 288 million inhabitants determines a global policy that affects the life of more then 7 billion people. A progressive movement for world democracy could build further on this simple insight and hold a plea for a democratisation of global political institutions.

Given the hegemonic alliance between liberal-democrats and social-democrats, the globalisation of democracy would be a bitter pill to swallow even for the social democrats of the third way: all ‘people’ on this planet would become formally equally important, and as a consequence the politician who wants to be ‘close to the people’, or who talks about ‘what the people want’, would loose all perspective. The true horror of the western social democrats is the equality of all people on this planet. The social democrats of the third way will be tempted to contest the idea of global democracy, loyal as they want to be to ‘the people’ with whom they

established, be it in the pub or via the media, an osmotic relationship. Why does everybody believe that 'the world' is an evident scale for action when we talk about the economy, and why does the world as a scale for action frighten us when we talk about politics? Is it the success of the populist principle that says that politics should be close to the people, that prevents us from thinking clearly about this? Isn't the idea that politics should be close to the people the most efficient way to avoid that politics would be effectively close to *those* people who need it the most?

One could summarize these contradictions in the following way. On the one hand, the contradiction of western liberal-democrats consists of the fact that they favour partial freedom. The freedom they wish for capital and goods are not given to people. On the other hand, the contradiction of western Social democrats consists of the fact that they favour local equality. It doesn't bother western Social democrats that the equality they might be able to realise locally, is not doing anything about global inequalities and even in some cases deepens these inequalities. One could also wonder what kind of Christianity it is that is supposed to be the source of inspiration for Christian-democratic politics in Europe. The otherglobalists should make explicit all ideological contradictions within the discourses of the traditional political parties in the western world.

Democracy produces the desire to be recognized as a human being. Only within democracy it means something to be a human being, and the desire for recognition as a human being is given its significance. At the same time, democracy also opens the discussion on what it means to be a human being. Democracy will not be able to satisfy man's desire for recognition definitely and absolutely because the question what it means to be a human being cannot be answered in a definite and absolute way. The actual

uneasiness with liberal democracy could have to do with the inadequacy of democracy to respond to certain conceptions of what it means to be a human being.

Many forms of intrasystemic resistance are motivated by conceptions of humanity that aren't recognized yet. This resistance can manifest itself intrasystemically because and as far as within democracy this discussion is possible. Loyalty to liberal democracy as a fundamental article of contestatory faith can be resolutely defended, on condition that democracy is understood as the principally never-ending discussion about what it means to be a human being. Resistance should be able to continue to resist those tendencies that would want to bring this discussion forever to a close, based on the conviction that closing this discussion about humanity will always produce its hegemonies and marginalities.

For democracy to be credible, no hegemony, but also no form of marginality should be constitutive of the functioning of the democratic system. Democracy should be the space in which in principle every hegemony can be contested with the means that democracy allows for that end. Democracy therefore should be defined as a space of resistance. Therefore every political system that doesn't allow for resistance thereby looses its claims on an eventual qualification as 'democratic'. This implies that democracy should not be seen as the liberal-individualistic idea that every individual should have as much power, but to the contrary, following a conception that one could call 'social-multitudinarian', should be understood as the space that allows for the formation and the alternation of hegemonic alliances. Democracy, then, is seen, not as the sum of individual preferences, but as a changing play of multitudinarian forces that struggle for hegemony.

Since 1989 we don't live the end of history, but at times (Seattle in December 1999, Genova in July 2001, London and hundreds of cities throughout the world in February 2003) of the foreshadowing of an organic crisis on a world level that could become the breeding ground for the formation of an alternative hegemony. For years now, hundreds and hundreds of otherglobalist movements and organisations have been working on the ruling neoliberal discourse. Maybe time has come for a democratic test of the level to which the otherglobalists have been capable of making the multitude think in other than postideological terms. Therefore otherglobalists should accept to play the democratic game and participate in elections on all levels as otherglobalists. If they don't do it, social-democrats, even liberal-democrats will present themselves as otherglobalists in elections. Indeed, an otherglobalist consensus is already in the making, even before one has been able to present an otherglobalist agenda through democratic political struggle.

One cannot turn Nietzsche into a democrat, but nothing prevents us from thinking democracy in a Nietzschean way (which, as a consequence, turns Nietzsche, willy-nilly, into a democrat *avant la lettre* anyway). Nietzsche didn't see democracy as a field of struggle; otherwise he would himself have discovered the compatibility of democracy with his philosophy of the will. This attempt to get Nietzsche at the side of democracy is inspired by the sadness provoked by a famous attempt to read Nietzsche as a defender of capitalism. Indeed, at the end of *The end of history and the last man*, Francis Fukuyama is very happy that he can call on Nietzsche as an authority in order to signal a possible shortcoming of liberal democracy, notwithstanding its philosophical perfectness. It allows him to legitimate capitalism in extremis as a systemic supplement to liberal democracy, a supplement that should answer the desire of

some people to be recognized as better. However, if one defines democracy as a discursive space of resistance, then the systemic necessity of capitalism as a supplement to democracy looses its main argument. Democracy also can answer the desire to be recognized as better: in democracy as space of resistance, politics becomes a struggle for the recognition of better thoughts about the future of the world.

According to Fukuyama, a country is democratic as soon as it gives its people the right to choose its own government through periodical, secret elections between different parties, on the basis of universal and equal voting rights for adults. Nevertheless, in most of the countries that fit this description, situations occur that are described by many as 'undemocratic'. In general, we could even risk the hypothesis that nowhere things are called as often 'undemocratic' as in countries that suit Fukuyama's definition of democracy. This has to do with what Chantal Mouffe has called the paradoxical character of liberal democracy. Liberal democracy is the product of a contingent articulation between two different traditions. On the one hand, there is the liberal tradition, based on the 'rule of law', the defence of human rights and the respect of individual freedom. On the other hand, there is the democratic tradition, based on the idea of equality, the identity of rulers and ruled and the idea of people's sovereignty. It's important to understand that liberal democracy is the product of two different logics that are ultimately incompatible and can't be perfectly reconciled. The tension between both these components can only be temporarily stabilised by pragmatic negotiations between political forces, negotiations that will produce the hegemony of one or the other. For Chantal Mouffe, the so-called 'Third Way' is nothing but the capitulation of social-democracy to a neoliberal

hegemony. This capitulation is problematic insofar as it undermines the legitimacy of every kind of resistance.

This is an important clarification of the frequently asked question whether there still should be any resistance today. The end of resistance is not the result of the presupposed systemic perfectness of capitalist liberal democracy, as Fukuyama would have it, but the result of contingent relations of power within a system that by definition will never be perfect, but only will be able to stabilise temporarily its internal contradictions. At the same time, the hegemonic power relations within the system give the impression that, if one still wants to resist, one will have to resist outside, and thus against, the system. The contemporary hegemony within liberal democracy undermines the credibility of liberal democracy as a space for resistance. The social-democrats of the 'Third Way' bare a devastating responsibility.[ii]

It isn't possible to reconcile Chantal Mouffe's concept of 'agonistic democracy' — the positive side of her critique of the consensus politics of the 'Third Way' — with the deep antagonism that Negri and Hardt dress up between Empire and the Multitude. This has to do with the fact that Negri and Hardt are not tempted to enter the democratic political arena in order to address the political problems they analyse. Anti-Imperial resistance, according to Negri and Hardt, should be understood as radically as possible. Against Mouffe, Negri and Hardt understand radicality as the refusal to enter parliamentary struggle. Even if Mouffe's concept of agonistic democracy is to be preferred to the anthropologically weakly argued radical democracy of Negri and Hardt, even then the confrontation with the contagious, excessive radicality of Negri and Hardt is very meaningful. Negri and Hardt make very clear in what global context the democratic struggle that to Mouffe seems desirable will

have to take place. Radical democracy should be articulated on the Imperial constitutionalisation process.

Radical democracy doesn't mean, as Negri and Hardt believe, that one rejects every kind of constitutionalisation process on the global level. Radical democracy means that one should radically democratise this constitutionalisation process and liberate it from its Imperial character. The details of this radically democratic global constitutionalisation process are a different matter, but one could think of the abolition of the G8, the formation and elaboration of regional political federations, a larger autonomy of world cities within these federations, a balanced representation of these regional federations within the Security Council of the United Nations, the direct election of representatives in the General Assembly of the United Nations and a more representative composition of this General Assembly taken into account the number of inhabitants of its members. In short, Empire should become a Federation.

The idea of global federalism implies in principle the devolution of global legislative competences to a world parliament. The scepticism among many about the feasibility of this global body is evidently known. Even the idea of a European federation meets with heavy resistance among those who, such as the British conservatives and the French '*souverainistes*', still consider the nation-states, notwithstanding all evidence to the contrary, as the exclusive loci of political sovereignty. If they aren't adversaries of Europe tout court, they are proponents of a European confederacy, within which the independent nation-states are allowed at all times to pronounce a 'non' or a 'nej'. It is very telling that in British politics 'federalism' is known as the 'F-word'.[iii]

Therefore, a global federation will stay for some (long) time a product of science fiction. To many, global federalism is an irrealistic utopia. But there could also lie a task for the otherglobalists. Until now, they didn't seem to have an elaborate institutional discourse, unless the sovereignists among them, who thereby have been proving how much they are on the wrong track. It would be completely consistent with the otherglobal critique of the political illegitimacy of a number of transnational organisations if one would defend federalism as the most appropriate political-institutional model for another world. The other world that otherglobalists are striving for so fervently, will not come into existence as long as the Imperial constitutionalisation of the world continues. Otherglobalists should resist this Imperial deconstruction of democracy. Global federalism then is a way to reconstruct democracy globally.

Resistance against the capitalist machine should situate itself resolutely on the level of Empire itself. Empire, Negri and Hardt frankly say, is better than the nation-state, as much as for Marx capitalism was better than feudalism.[iv] Not 'the people', Negri and Hardt argue, should be the subject of resistance, but 'the multitude' of exploited and repressed people throughout the world. As long as one still considers 'the people' as the privileged subject of resistance, the result of that resistance will only be at the most a shift of power within a particular nation-state, or probably the creation of a new nation-state, while, according to Negri and Hardt, one shouldn't expect any good from the nation-state at all. The rejection of 'the people' as a suitable subject of resistance means the denial of the unambiguous emancipatory credibility of any form of nationalism. The so-called 'subaltern' nationalism, as for instance the black nationalism in the United States, has both a progressive and a reactionary side. Those, who, as a 'people', resist a

dominant majority or an external oppression, impose themselves most often as a dominant majority repressing other internal minorities.[v]

The contemporary organic intellectual considers himself no longer as the representative of his 'people', but imposes himself as a spokesperson for the multitude of political and economic refugees, of illegal digitarians, of rebellious allochtone youngsters, of insecure workers in industries that delocalise from 'the north' or 'the west', and of outrageously exploited workers in industries who relocated in 'the south' or 'the east'. Thus, the contemporary transformation of hegemony also affects the representation of the intellectual. Today, the subaltern-nationalist intellectual, who in the past could claim the legacy of Gramsci, should make way, in the name of an actualisation of Gramscian thought, for the global-multitudinarian intellectual. Today, the multitudinarian intellectual defends, not a particular repressed identity, but the productive multiplicity of the multitude, the productivity of which is all too often denied or abused.

If the multitude is to resist efficiently the way in which its intrinsic productivity in all its sections is denied, then these sections will not only have to celebrate their singularity, but they will have to express what they have in common. The expression of the common of the unemployed, the refugee, the alien, the digitarian, the employee who lives in permanent insecurity about the future of his job, is a necessary step in the politicisation of resistance. Resistance has to go through a phase where it becomes discourse, a discourse that reflects the common conditions of the multitude. The multitude is not the spontaneous unity as Negri and Hardt present it and wish it. Some hard work at counter-thoughts is still needed in order to realise an alliance between all sections and fractions of the multitude. Today, some fractions of the multitude are tied in a

'historic bloc' with sections of Empire. As long as those fractions prefer to see each other as 'the problem', rather than as a possible ally, it will not be possible to break up the actual hegemony of the transnational elite.

Through the operationalisation of all possible variations on the concept of the 'workfare state', western social democrats have in fact chosen to represent only a part of the distressed multitude. They've chosen to drive a wedge between parts of the multitude. Thus they consolidate the hegemony of the transnational elite. The type of intellectual who is the advocate of a broad alliance between all those who are repressed, be it aliens or refugees, be it insecure workers or hedonistic digitarians, who glamorize their precarity with a certain naiveté, and therefore tend to depoliticize their precarious situation, well this global-multitudinarian intellectual thwarts in an annoying way these attempts for consolidation. It might explain why the relationship between institutionalised social democracy and large parts of the leftist intelligentsia has been very stiff for some time now

i See David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*, London/New York, Verso, (1982), 1999, pp. 398-405.

ii See Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London/New York, Verso, 2000, pp. 5-6.

iii See *Vers une constitution européenne. Texte commenté du projet de traité constitutionnel établi par la Convention européenne,* (Présentation et commentaires par Etienne de Poncins), Paris, Editions 10/18, 2003, p. 81.

iv See Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 43.

v See *Ibid.,* p. 106.