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The discussion about "Empire"

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Three years after its publication, "Empire" has achieved the status of a pop classic. The book by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri can look back on sales figures like no other radical book could in decades, and also has succeeded in circulating various slogans and labels. Its tone is quite academic for a bestseller, though. Whereas the general discussion and the reception in the feuilleton has been largely positive, if not euphoric, the academic debate about "Empire" has been rather critical.

The attention "Empire" has received can be told from the vast amount of reviews: Apparentlyno political journal could do without publishing a review. After three years, it seems about time to make an interim assessment of the debate. What are, apart from applause and enthusiasm, the most important critical points of critique having been brought forward against Hardt and Negri? The following survey presents some of the central theses of "Empire" and confronts them with critique of its reviewers.

The multitude of critique

-"**Empire**": The nation state changes its function, sovereignty is increasingly transferred to a global empire, in which nation states are only parts.
Criticism: The decline of nation states, above all the US, is exaggerated (Henwood, Hirsch), the exposition of the emerging empire is not very precise (Wissel/Buckel). The phase of imperialism is not over, especially considering the conduct of the USA after 9-11 (Brand, Brennan, Castronovo, Callinicos, Chingo, Jahnke, Petras, Post, Wark).

-"**Empire**": Empire is a new phase of capitalism, which is characterised by postmodern ways of living, postfordist modes of production and the rule of control society.
Criticism: There is no new phase replacing an old one, but old ways of exploitation and domination continue to exist alongside new forms (Bensaid, Hauer, Lemke). The division of capitalist development in distinct phases and paradigms suggests a stability, order and inner cohesion within these paradigms, which downplays their contradictions and instability (Bonnet, Hauer, Holloway).
By calling out a new phase, the criticism of left movements of the past is cleverly circumvented: What happened then was right for its time, according to Empire. It is only today thateverything has changed, that old theories lose their relevance. This discursive strategy makes learning from the past impossible (Bernhard).

-"**Empire**": There is no clear distinction between first and third world any longer, wealth and poverty can be found everywhere.
Criticism: There are still drastic geographical differences, capital attaches different importance to different areas. The global south is underanalysed in "Empire", it overgeneralises too much from conditions in the industrialised countries (Arrighi, Boron, Callinicos, Chingo, Diefenbach, Ludmer, Moore, Mutman). In

general, "Empire" underestimates the geograhical embeddedness of power (Kirsch).

-"**Empire**": Empire follows a logic which can be derived from the US constitution (openness, ability to integrate the new).
Criticism: This paints a one-sided picture of the US constitution as well as its use in practice (Panitch). In addition, this line of reasoning declares political-juridical theory instead of political economy or social forces the moving principle of real phenomena (Bamyeh, Beasley-Murray, Dyer, Hartmann, Jessop).

-"**Empire**": The evolution of capitalism is driven by the resistance of the multitude, which forces capital to reorganise production over and over again.
Criticism: The emphasis on the conflict between labor and capital (or multitude and empire) neglects competition between capitalists as an important driving force behind innovation and development (Callinicos, Chingo, Coates, Kittsteiner, Panitch, Wolf). The sole emphasis on struggle denies the existence of laws of movement of capitalism (Callinicos, Jahnke). Apart from that, the thesis is not applied consistently on all historical phases in the book (Panitch). The definition of the multitude is unclear and changes within the book (Rapp). With the shimmering concept of "multitude" every detailed engagement with the composition, the contradictions, the origin and the potential of resistance is neglected, the concept does not provide any criteria for a discussion and assessment of movements (Bernhard, Panitch, Wildcat). The necessity of organisation and leadership for the movement is downplayed, as well as the potential beneficial role of the state (Bischoff, Marchart, Proyect).

-"**Empire**": Multitude and Empire stand antagonistically against each another.

Criticism: Capital or rather Empire is not a subject, but a social relation(ship), in which all subjects are interwoven (Hirsch). Therefore the multitude can not be a clean subject, which goes its way unpolluted by dominant relationships. As can be seen in real life, not all resistance is emancipatory, but often aspects of domination like will to power, racism and sexism are to be found within oppositional movements (Anne, Arrighi, Dyer, Hauer, Lemke, Ricos). The restructuring of capitalism also produces new divisions and hierarchies between working people. The success of neoliberal ideology and competition between individuals is underestimated (Coates). "Empire"avoids engagement with regard to historical fascism as well as with current right wing populist movements (Benl, Bischoff, Olma).
By constructing two neatly separated opposing blocks, "Empire" claims that power is something external to people. This thesis is in contradiction to another argument in the book – namely that we live in an era of "real subsumption", in which all areas of life are permeated by capitalism (Balakrishnan, Hauer, Thoburn).
"Empire" goes so far as to argue that Empire is not more than a parasite which steals profit from the productive multitude – an argument that approaches structural antisemitism (Benl, Hartmann, Kurz). In general, "Empire" tends to employ simple dichotomies instead of analysing things in their ambivalence (Lemke).
Maybe potential for change can rather be found in circumstances and constellations which are typical for today as described by Hardt/Negri, than in certain subjects (Diefenbach).

-"**Empire**": Civil society as an autonomous sphere has withered away, Empire and multitude are positioned against each other without any mediation.
Criticism: Intermediaries are still very important (Coates),

struggles within institutions are important, because they prepare the terrain for more comprehensive and aggressive struggles (Brand).

-"**Empire**": Immaterial labour is central to today's production process. Cooperation, one of its main features, has liberating potential for self organisation.
Criticism: The importance of immaterial labour is overstated and is not statistically proved. "Empire"'s argument relies too much on unchecked appropriation of management propaganda of the new economy period, Negri/Hardt's own analysis of the information society is at times rather weak (Brennan, Galagher, Hauer, Henwood, Panitch, Wildcat).
The concept of immaterial labour tries to subsume too many heterogeneous practices (Diefenbach, Dyer, Levinson). The centrality of immaterial labour for today's capitalism does not necessarily imply its centrality for resistance (Dyer).
The thesis has an elitist touch,which downplays the role of the masses of material workers (Callinicos, Dörhöfer, Olma).
The question of the content of the producing multitude's creativity is not posed, the potential for self organisation in communicative capabilities is overvalued, aspects of domination within communication are neglected (Benl, Hauer, Jappe, Kurz, Thoburn, Wassmer).

-"**Empire**": "Basic income for all" is a key demand of the multitude.
Criticism: On the one hand, "Empire" is cricital against groups defending the nation state against globalisation. On the other hand, it propagates a basic income for all. Who should pay out this basic income if not the state? (Henwood, Rapp)

-"**Empire**": Capital shall acknowledge the reality of migration and its dependence on it by establishing a form of world citizenship.
Criticism: Negri/Hardt try to justify the demands for a basic income and world citizenship with the productivity of the multitude. This justification does not take the individual and her needs as its starting point, but her usefulness for capital, which is reactionary thinking (Hauer, Kurz, Wissel/Buckel).
The call for world citizenship neglects the fact that the illegalisation of migrants is the precondition for their extreme exploitability by capital. Celebrating the liberatory potential of migration overlooks a number of things: its forced character in many cases (Anne, Raunig), that the majority of people is not mobile (Mishra), and that the experience of migration does not lead to emancipatory thinking in many cases (Jappe). The reality of the much appraised poor is barely analysed (Brennan).

-"**Empire**": The distinction between production and reproduction is getting blurred, affective labour formerly ascribed to women is now a requirement for most jobs.
Criticism: Negri/Hardt idealise women's labour as egalitarian and community oriented, but they do not provide an analysis of gender relationships and sexual division of labour (Schultz). The continuity resp. the extension of unpaid reproductive work, which is mainly done by women, is ignored (Schultz). Specifics of the everyday as basis or impediments to political activity remain unanalysed (Bernhard).

-Optimistic and visionary language of "Empire"
Criticism: Instead of criticising power, "Empire" just reinterprets it and tries to attach optimistic potential to it. But optimism is not appropriate and just leads to an apology of existing power relations (Brand, Castronovo, Callinicos, Conert, Fülberth), because "Empire" proposes going with and going beyond the existing

society instead of rejecting it (Hartmann).
Too many metaphors, inaccuracies, exaggerations, religious overtones and theory (and some of the theory engaged with in a misleading way, above all Foucault (Hartmann)), not enough political economy and empirics (Arrighi, Balakrishnan, Benl, Brand, Burgio, Conert, Flood, Panitch, Wissel/Buckel). Theories are employed by Hardt/Negri only selectively to justify their theses, not as means of political analysis (Maniglier).

The five lines of critique

The first phase of debates about "Empire" is now more or less over – the central points of critique have been made. Within the left, critics can be grouped into several categories:

First, there are those whose main difficulty is the style of the book. The manifesto character of "Empire", its visionary wording and its sometimes rather free-wheeling use of citations stand in contrast to a view of science which prefers acribic stock taking and critique of the state of the world as well as authentic use of classics, as well as to a school of thought which locates itself in a minor and powerless position vis à vis the the existing power relations. In contrast, the style of Hardt/Negri with its exaggerations and its drawing of sketches is an attempt to consider scope of action within the struggles going on in the world and to locate oneself as part of political movements and contribute to shaping them – a completely different approach to theory.

A second group of critics raises empirical arguments against the theses put forward in "Empire", some of them plausibly, some of them not quite.

A third line of critique is represented by competing schools of thought, whose arguments are dominated by defenses against new interpretations of reality (other marxist schools, critics oriented on the party, trade union and the state etc.). In the view of some of them, the very success of "Empire" seems a sign for its lack of quality and opportunism. The best of these critiques serve the useful function of marking and highlighting the differences between their and Hardt/Negri's approaches and thereby showing to the unaccustomed reader what is new in "Empire".

An interesting fourth group highlights internal contradictions within the book. No wonder that such an ambitious work as "Empire" shows inconsistencies - sometimes they are also just ambivalences. To highlight these sometimes looks like beancounting, but often provides valuable hints for further thinking.

Up to now a fifth strand is still underdeveloped – one that takes insights from "Empire" for further thought and applies the concepts developed therein on different areas, complements them and develops them further.

How to proceed

A final judgement on "Empire" in the light of criticism goes beyond my abilities. But does "Empire" needto be defended after all?

Partly the authors have answered their critics (above all in the special issue on "Empire" in the journal "Rethinking Marxism" as well as in countless interviews): The claim of the centrality of immaterial labour does not refer to the number of immaterial jobs,

but to its centrality in qualitative terms. "Empire" does not claim the decline of the nation state, but its changing function. The thesis of the dissolution of the Third World does not imply the growing homogeneity of the world, but the claim that hierarchies are not developing along national boundaries any more. And finally: Yes, after 9-11 there has been an imperalist backlash in the USA (the crisis which 9-11 implies for "Empire" can be told from a strange article that Michael Hardt has published in The Guardian. There he calls on global elites to realise that a decentralised Empire is a better form of rule than an imperialist war. Funny, in a way.). Partly, the lines of thought presented in "Empire" has found followers in political movements and theory circles which now argue with critics in different fora and contexts. On top of that, Hardt/Negri work on a sequel to their book – Empire, part two. As it should be for a blockbuster...

But why should one expect from the two to present a complete and consistent explanation of the world today, which convinces everybody? A lot is shaky in their theoretical building, like in all other
theories – that's the way it is in the business of social theory.

Not every proposition in "Empire" has to be defended – but the principal approach and the central impluses well enough. Because "a theory is as good as the things one can do with them", Katja Diefenbach reminds us citing Deleuze/Guattari, "and you can do a lot of things with "Empire"." The call to unrest, the constant search for ruptures and connections, the exploration of possibilities and proposition of political projects in new constellations – these impulses are well worth pursuing.

Now it remains to be seen whether the first phase of critique will be followed by a second phase of productive engagement, further

development and political effects of the "Empire" impulse. Such a process can not be confined to books. Because the fundamental questions can only be answered by political movements. Multitude, get moving!

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