

Assembly by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri: A compendium of pseudo-left and anti-Marxist politics

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Assembly is the latest in a series of books (*Commonwealth*, 2009; *Multitude*, 2004; most famously, *Empire*, 2000) written by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt. Published by major university or commercial presses, these works have had a certain influence, particularly in radical circles in academia, but also on various social movements, political organizations, and even bourgeois statesmen such as the late Hugo Chavez.

A self-styled political manifesto, *Assembly* takes as its point of departure the political upsurge that started in 2011—the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, the Spanish Indignados, Occupy Wall Street, and beyond, which are revealingly all lumped together as “occupations and encampments.” Hardt and Negri position themselves as critical advisors to these movements, endorsing what they present as their healthy general premises, but also pointing to weaknesses that must be addressed, from their point of view, to move forward.

Assembly is a dismal book. It is saturated with reactionary postmodern conceptions, recycles worn-out anarchist recipes as innovative and progressive experiments and endorses virtually every political dead end of the recent and not-so-recent past. It stands as a sort of compendium of prevailing anti-Marxist, pseudo-left positions, while at the same time presenting them in a manner that seeks to exploit the intellectual and political authority of Marxism. Exposing the character and implications of such impostures within the working class and among young people is essential to clearing the path for the development of genuine Marxism, represented by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Before the substance of the book can be addressed, it is necessary to identify its ideological provenance.

Autonomism and postmodernism

The arguments found in *Assembly* can be traced in the background of its authors. Negri has a long and tortuous political biography that includes membership in Catholic youth organizations and the reformist Italian Socialist Party, an alleged involvement with the terrorist Red Brigades, two long periods of incarceration in Italy, and political exile in France. Most salient is Negri’s longstanding involvement with Italian autonomism, which informs much of the language and political substance of *Assembly*.

Autonomism emerged in Italy in the 1960s and ’70s in response to the increasingly overt pro-capitalist policies of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and its trade unions, but also drawing from anarchist traditions that historically have had a certain purchase in Italy. Justifiably disgusted by the conduct of the Italian Stalinists, and at the same time unable to understand its causes, a small section of leftist intellectuals and militants broke not just with the PCI but with the basic premises of Marxism—most importantly, the struggle to build a revolutionary party of the working class.

Having rejected the party form as such, autonomism took the shape of extra-parliamentary movements, such as Potere Operaio (Workers Power) and Autonomia Operaia (Workers Autonomy), bringing together local groups often centered around radical radio stations and publications. Negri was a leading figure in both organizations.

While maintaining at least a rhetorical commitment to the working class, the class struggle, as well as a very selective and revisionist interest in the writings of Marx, the autonomists’ main point of departure was that workers would spontaneously attain autonomy not just ideologically, from parties claiming to represent them, but concretely and through their own emancipatory agency, within the folds of existing capitalist society.

Besides the occasional stimulation from outside in the form of terrorist acts, they identified the possibility for this autonomy in what they perceived as the transformation of the labor process. Having initially centered its theories and practical efforts in large industrial factories, autonomism evolved in a very different direction toward what would now be called “post-Fordism.” That is, it proclaimed the demise of factory-centered capitalist production as well as the traditional industrial working class.

While presenting this as a necessary turn that would extend the class struggle outside the workplace into society as a whole, autonomism in reality adapted itself to the various forms of middle-class politics of the 1970s, particularly feminism and student radicalism. It is this “mature” autonomism, along with its characteristic slogans and practices—counterpower, refusal of work, self-management, self-reduction, autonomous spaces, etc.—that Negri recycles in *Assembly*.

This already inauspicious political background was compounded by Negri’s direct encounter with the views of leading French post-modernists. Negri taught political philosophy for several years in Paris alongside Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze.

The same basic political mechanisms that were in place in Italy were also present in France. But in the latter country they took an even sharper form particularly through the events of May–June 1968. A radical student movement in the universities became the touchstone for a massive general strike in which more than ten million workers brought the country to a standstill. Red flags flew over the major factories in France, and the head of the government fled to Germany to consult with his generals. At this juncture, it was the Stalinists and their affiliated trade unions, along with their Pabloite accomplices led by Alain Krivine and Pierre Frank, that moved to consciously save French capitalism from the abyss.

These events demonstrated two central lessons. First, the working class was indeed the only independent revolutionary force. Its powerful intervention into politics rapidly overwhelmed the petty-bourgeois movement in the universities and posed directly the question of political

power. Second, as demonstrated by the betrayal perpetrated by the Stalinists, the issue of the political leadership and organization of the working class was in fact the decisive one (For a detailed analysis of these events, including the role played by the Pabloites and by the French section of the ICFI, see “1968: The general strike and the student revolt in France”).

These tumultuous events erupted in the midst of a decades-long retreat by considerable sections of the petty bourgeois intelligentsia from socialism and the working class. Influenced by various forms of so-called Western Marxism, the Frankfurt School, existentialism and other trends, various academics, writers, journalists and activists had long before dismissed the working class as a revolutionary force in capitalist society.

The central questions of the 20th century—the taking of power by the Russian workers led by the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution and the subsequent betrayal of the revolution and the international working class by Stalinism, along with Trotsky’s analysis of that world-historical process and fight for the Fourth International—were ignored by the disparate “New Left” forces. Those issues threatened to disrupt in many cases their own relations with the Stalinist bureaucracy. Moreover, they posed revolutionary responsibilities that these middle class elements were entirely unprepared to undertake. So, despite a good deal of “left” phrase-mongering and fist-shaking in and around the time of the 1968 French general strike, the general trajectory of these layers *away from* the perspective and program of world socialist revolution was not halted.

On the contrary, terrified by the revolutionary intervention of the working class, a host of prominent intellectuals who were in or around the Communist Party of France drew instead the opposite conclusions, abandoning Marxism altogether and turning sharply to the right, politically as well as in matters of philosophy.

The notion of the working class as the only objectively existing, universal political subject capable of the revolutionary and progressive transformation of society was more and more openly abandoned in favor of identitarian and lifestyle standpoints. “Modernity” as such was denounced as a terrible mistake and different forms of idealism, subjectivism, irrationalism, and pessimism began to carry the day in academic and intellectual circles.

Negri was deeply influenced by many of these ideas. In describing the evolution of his philosophical views in French academia, he stated, “I went to wash my clothes in the Seine.” However, as his personal popularity and academic position in France rested on his association with autonomism and the state repression directed against him, Negri cultivated a specific niche in the postmodernist milieu by preserving some of militant verbiage of old days.

In the last section of *Empire*, for example, having denounced the “sad, ascetic agent of the Third International,” and invoked the “productivity of postmodern biopolitics,” the authors conclude by bizarrely proclaiming their “irrepressible lightness and joy of being communist.”

Negri’s peculiar and unwholesome background sets the basic ideological framework of *Assembly*. As to his co-author, American literary critic Michael Hardt, it appears he got close to Negri initially by translating his work on Spinoza, and then presumably added the necessary know-how to successfully navigate the vagaries of the American academic market.

Horizontalism and verticality

The central issue taken up in *Assembly* is the kind of political leadership and organization necessary to bring capitalism to an end and usher in genuine freedom and equality. The question is presented in a thoroughly unserious matter, most often in the crossword form of the “puzzle of horizontalism and verticality.”

The claim is that organizations of the left have taken an overly “vertical” form, more or less fraudulently claimed to represent the broad

masses, and, even when successful, ultimately reproduced the same forms of domination they sought to combat. As Hardt and Negri put it, past attempts to “take power,” have resulted in “simply reversing the relationship of domination, ruling over others, and ... maintaining the machinery of sovereign power while merely changing who sits at the controls.”

The principal target of this criticism, as is often the case in *Assembly*, is Marxism. The “vanguard party,” in particular, is repeatedly denounced in the most intransigent terms: “We have no sympathy with those who claim that ... we need to resuscitate the corpse of the modern vanguard party ... no act of necromancy will breathe life into the vanguard party form today.”

Leaving aside the issue of Hardt and Negri’s own sinister séances, their criticism of Marxism is directed against a cheap and readily available caricature. From the “old reform-or-revolution debates that so inflamed our grandparents” to the “old notions of the unstoppable transition ‘from socialism to communism,’ with which we have a long and painful experience,” the authors consistently present Marxism as an obviously outdated and crude construct, while at the same time reminding the reader of Negri’s hard-earned lessons as some kind of repentant insider.

There is very little actual discussion in *Assembly* of the Marxist conception of leadership and organization and what is entailed in its struggle for political power. For Hardt and Negri, a few glib references and innuendos are sufficient to establish that the political party as such, and the Leninist party in particular, can only misrepresent and mislead the masses, that it constitutes an artificial imposition upon their spontaneous political wishes, and that seizing power under its leadership must take place on bourgeois terms, leaving fundamental forms of political power unchanged and simply replacing one unwanted master with another.

The real force of Hardt and Negri’s arguments thus cannot rest on their superficial ruminations equating decisively different forms of “verticality,” but in decades of anti-communism, along with a more general decay of political thinking, resulting in a climate in which enough people will be prepared to nod along about the obviously totalitarian tendencies inherent in Bolshevism. While it is not possible here to discuss at length its theoretical legacy on this score, it must be said that Hardt and Negri’s criticism are as conventional as they are false.

The political consciousness of workers begins, in a historical and practical sense, as bourgeois consciousness. This is not a haughty proclamation on the part of a few intellectuals and would-be dictators, but the result of very concrete conditions. From its ascent to political power down to today, the capitalist class controls not just of the means of economic production but also the means of intellectual production—universities, media, culture in the most general sense. This is what Marx meant when he famously wrote that the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.

Bolshevism developed the specific forms of leadership and organization necessary for the working class to break this ideological grip, particularly in the form of a revolutionary political party.

Lenin’s *What is to be Done?* explains that socialist consciousness comes into the working class from “outside.” But this is true in the historical sense that socialist ideas were originally developed not inside the factories, but from advanced layers of the educated middle classes. The revolutionary party is exactly the vehicle through which, through a series of consciously directed organizational and political processes, the “outside” can become “inside.” The “vanguard,” put differently, was not conceived as categorically and permanently separate from the rest of the army, the working class.

Similarly, Lenin’s *The State and Revolution* establishes in no uncertain terms that the dictatorship of the proletariat, far from “simply reversing the relationship of domination,” was intended as marking a profound transformation in the very nature of political power, creating transitional forms of government that would begin to immediately reabsorb functions

historically appropriated by a separate state apparatus back into society.

To be sure, the rise of Stalinism after the Russian revolution meant that a yawning gap opened up between these theoretical conceptions and the tragic history that unfolded in the Soviet Union. But Hardt and Negri are not interested in seriously discussing this history either, except for a few assertions about the “state capitalist” character of the USSR—that is, that it did not abolish capitalist property and that it engaged in “imperialist endeavors.” Following the lead of vulgar anti-communism, they gloss over what are in fact the most significant political struggles of the 20th century.

Far from emerging seamlessly after the Russian Revolution, on its way to power the Stalinist bureaucracy had to smash the political opposition to its nationalist and totalitarian policies that rallied around Leon Trotsky, first in the form of the Left Opposition, and then in the Fourth International; it had to physically exterminate the most advanced layers of the working class in the Soviet Union and snuff out revolutionary movements around the world; and it had to cover up these crimes by means of a monstrous and unprecedented campaign of historical falsification which finds in Hardt and Negri’s banalities about “verticality” a weak and predictable echo.

In other words, the promotion of their views requires Hardt and Negri to ignore or falsify the most critical experiences and the actual course of the global class struggle over the past century.

The charge of excessive verticality is used to conveniently cut through all sorts of complex historical questions, creating at one point an even broader amalgam lumping together “communists of the First, Second, and Third Internationals, guerrilla leaders in the mountains of Latin America and Southeast Asia, Maoists in China and West Bengal, black nationalists in the United States and many others.”

This sort of ahistorical jumbling of the past is found throughout the book as the authors simply pick and choose certain episodes to illustrate the boons of non-vertical politics.

The great bourgeois democratic revolutions of the 17th and 18th century are referred to as instances of autonomist “counterpower” and are then linked to the Mexican Zapatistas and Polish Solidarity. Italian and French partisan “liberated zones” toward the end of World War II are invoked along-side the “democratic autonomy” of today’s Kurdish-controlled Rojava. The latter is presented as an exciting democratic experiment without so much as a mention of the Kurdish YPG’s alliance with American imperialism, while the former are similarly ripped from the complex historical fabric of the struggle against fascism.

History in any serious sense is a closed book in *Assembly*, and without an engagement with at least the essential strategic experiences of the working class, no progressive, or even coherent politics can possibly be presented.

Returning to the question of Marxist theory, on the rare occasions when Hardt and Negri venture into a more specific discussion of it, the results are instructive. Particularly striking is the half-page dedicated to Trotsky’s chapter “The Art of Insurrection” in the *History of the Russian Revolution*. Trotsky’s views are presented in terms of a crude formula: “revolution = spontaneity + conspiracy,” so that in his hands the “science of politics” is regrettably reduced to a “recipe book providing the cook with the proper quantities.”

Hardt and Negri’s mocking formula is already an incorrect rendering of the initial terms of Trotsky’s analysis, which are in fact “insurrection” and “conspiracy,” with the former understood as “never purely spontaneous,” and the latter as a much more complex matter than some cloak and dagger operation.

As any reader can easily verify, Trotsky’s chapter is in fact a masterpiece that weaves together in dialectical fashion, among other things, an analysis of the conditions in which an insurrection can be said to have a democratic character, of the question of timing in a

revolutionary situation, and of the relationship between institutions of mass representation and the fighting organs required to carry out the seizure of power—the latter being not simply something Trotsky brilliantly theorized, but a feat he actually carried out as the leader of the Military Revolutionary Committee in October 1917.

Hardt and Negri must know this, since only a couple of pages after their dismissal of Trotsky as an amateurish theoretician of the “science of politics,” they trot out a surprisingly sophisticated criticism of the concept of spontaneity that bears more than a passing resemblance to what Trotsky himself wrote in the above-cited chapter of his *History*, as well as another brilliant one titled, “Who led the February Revolution?”

In any case, while much of their argument consists of denunciation of “verticality,” Hardt and Negri do not endorse pure “horizontalism.” They claim that today “more not less focus on organization” is necessary, and that new forms “have to be invented.”

This point is politically significant insofar as Hardt and Negri seem to be aware at some level of the miserable record of movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the Spanish Indignados, which channeled opposition to social inequality and to what passes for democracy under capitalism today back into bourgeois politics, in part by promoting and enforcing “horizontalism.” However, the forms of organization proposed in *Assembly*, for all the verbal frippery involved, in the end merely reshuffle all the existing, conventional and failed practices of pseudo-left politics.

One of the later chapters, titled “And Now What?” provides the clearest account of what Hardt and Negri actually put forth politically. In it, three strategies are advanced.

The first is called “exodus,” and consists of creating small democratic and egalitarian oases—utopian communities, occupied social centers, encampments. These are conceived as somehow able to exist autonomously from the economic circuits of capital—and in fact undermining those circuits, rather than the other way around—as well as somehow sheltered from the reprisals of the capitalist state.

Having occasionally protested against the “official Left” and recurring appeals to its regroupment and reconstruction earlier in the book, Hardt and Negri then put forth a more recognizable second strategy called “antagonistic reformism.” They are compelled to immediately draw a verbal distinction between it and the “collaborative” sort, which cannot possibly be based in any discernible political reality of the past century.

Based on previous sections of the book, the more important matter seems to be not so much claiming to, let alone being able to carry out progressive policies, but the extent to which “antagonistic reformists” can be said to have been veering away from the party form, while at the same time continuing to indulge in unprincipled and reactionary electoral maneuvers.

For this reason, Syriza, Podemos, and some of the Latin American governments associated with the “Pink Tide” generally receive Hardt and Negri’s approval. Even more revealingly, the “progressive politician” Barack Obama with his “promises of substantial change” and his “relative success” is also enlisted into the ranks of “antagonistic reformism.”

The last strategy of “taking power” combines and encapsulate the other two: actual existing “leftist” governments do what they can to advance a progressive agenda in bourgeois parliaments, while autonomist-style occupations and encampments develop independent forms of “counter-powers” of the bonsai sort.

Taken together, and for all of their book’s many theoretical contortions, Hardt and Negri come down politically on the side of virtually all of the existing forms of pseudo-left politics. They not only bitterly oppose the struggle for the political independence of the working class, through all its necessary steps involving organization and leadership, but in fact call into question its very existence.

Working class and “multitude”

As in the case of leadership and organization, Hardt and Negri’s dealing with the working class as a political and social subject involves certain characteristic slippages.

On one hand, they rightly criticize the notion of “autonomy of the political” put forth by various post-Marxist figures, pointing instead to the necessity of grounding politics in the terrain of social relations. From that standpoint they do at times refer to the working class, and moreover explicitly reject the notion that various forms of identity can be the basis for emancipatory politics.

However, these are merely gambits designed to exploit the political authority of Marxism while attempting to orient the reader toward a very different set of social forces. In the same way that in their first book Hardt and Negri sought to replace the classical Marxist conception of imperialism with their equivocal notion of “Empire,” in *Assembly* the working class is invoked in order to give way to their “multitude,” which ultimately refers to the familiar categories of pseudo-left and identity politics.

The Marxist conception of the working class is once again presented in the form of a caricature calculated to put off the reader. In putting forth their alternative, for example, Hardt and Negri lambast the notion of “homogeneous” and “unified” working class, as if anybody would actually defend it in those terms.

To invoke the working class is obviously not to assume cultural, national, linguistic, gender, or other forms of “homogeneity.” What workers across all such lines share is the fact that they own nothing but their labor-power and are thus at the mercy of those who control the means of production. A wide variety of otherwise very different human beings can then be said to objectively occupy the same fundamental social position and, on that basis, share the same fundamental social interests, whether or not they consciously recognize this.

As to the “unified” character of the working class, while in the objective sense mentioned above this is already accomplished by capitalism, in a subjective, political sense this is exactly the task Marxism sets for itself.

The Marxist understanding of the working class is also branded as “idealistic and totalizing” and, rather than an ontological reality in the sense specified above, merely as an ideological mystification perpetrated by capitalism. This view turns reality on its head. From the invention of race in the 17th century to the ongoing promotion of identity politics, it is the capitalist class that has systematically produced and promoted the idea that a host of politically salient and unbridgeable social differences divide workers from one another.

Hardt and Negri thus do not simply present the working class as a theoretically untenable construct, but also as a sinister sleight of hand. “Too often,” they write, “... Marxist parties, unions and theorists have maintained the centrality of ‘productive’ labor ... Such arguments often served as alibis from excluding from ‘primary’ struggle all except white male factory workers: women and students, the poor and migrants, people of color and peasants have all been victims of political strategies based on this view.”

The multitude, defined at one point as “myriad heterogeneous subjectivities of social production,” is then none other than the familiar mosaic of identity politics. Black Lives Matter, for example, is repeatedly praised as politically progressive and even as an organizational model—without any mention of the generous support provided to it by the Ford Foundation, of its reactionary racialism, or its myriad ties to the Democratic Party. The feminism of the 1960s and ‘70s is also similarly praised for its “horizontalism,” without even posing the question of its social basis and political record. The language of identity politics—“intersectionality,” “microaggressions,” etc.—begins to appear

more and more boldly in the later sections of the book.

Hardt and Negri arrive at these ordinary and tired conclusions after apparently having rejected “identity” earlier on. The multitude is presented as irreducibly plural, as a melting pot of unstable “singularities” that might at any point evolve into other, unexpected substances. “Movements,” they write, “must be nonidentitarian. Identity based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality or any social factor closes down the plurality of movements, which must be instead internally diverse, multitudinous.” As categorical as this injunction might sound, particularly considering their endorsement of spontaneity, it does not constitute a fundamental break from identity politics. Rather, the reader is left with an incongruous endorsement of identity politics ... without identity.

This position may be the flip side of Hardt and Negri’s intransigent hostility to the working class as a singular, unified, international emancipatory subject. When they write that “multitudinous pluralism means breaking with every fetishistic conception of a political union,” the static and in some cases atavistic conception of identity deployed by the pseudo-left falls as collateral damage. This incongruity also seems calculated to appeal to all the entrenched political prejudices of the pseudo-left while at the same time claiming to offer something theoretically novel in such a saturated market.

On the whole, *Assembly* combines enthusiastic support for the disastrous political efforts of the pseudo-left with a series of disorienting and dishonest theoretical amalgams. Claiming to put together a set of instructions for the emancipation of humanity, Hardt and Negri instead advance a doggedly right-wing and anti-working class politics. The development of a genuine socialist movement requires a struggle against their ideas and the pseudo-left milieu from which they emerge.

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