

ON GLOBAL DEMOCRACY

An Interview with Michael Hardt

by Kelly Burdick and Armando Mastrogiovanni

Michael Hardt, Associate Professor in the Literature Program at Duke University, is the coauthor of the controversial book *Empire* with Antonio Negri. *Empire's* task is to articulate the structure of what Hardt and Negri see as the current global stratification of power, as well as to locate within that structure the source of its inevitable collapse. This global order – what they name “Empire” – is constituted by the productive human bodies distributed within it. The authors name this immense mass of bodies the “multitude,” distinguishing it from other available categories, such as “the people,” or even the “proletariat,” in that the multitude is more basic, and by definition includes all existing bodies. Although dependent on the multitude, Empire nevertheless dominates the multitude.

It is the tension in this relationship that interests the authors. They write, “The most relevant aspect that the struggles have demonstrated may be sudden accelerations, often cumulative, that can become virtually simultaneous, explosions that reveal a properly ontological power and unforeseeable attack on the most central equilibria of Empire.” Following the February 15, 2003 demonstrations against the Iraq War, collectively called the largest protest in human history, we ask Michael Hardt how we might understand the face of the multitude when it is confronted by its own global properties. What can we learn about democracy, and what kinds of transformations must we consider, when we encounter a global movement that demands alternatives, that demands democracy?

BardPolitik Recently people have been describing current movements in terms that are immediately understandable. For instance, *The New York Times* noted that the protests on February 15, 2003 clearly indicated the presence of “the other superpower.”

Hardt I think that one sentence on Monday the 17 of February was extremely significant.

BardPolitik We were talking about how these sorts of politically charged phrases – and even the idea of global democracy – are perhaps really useful only up to a certain point, that at a certain level they might break down. Do you see this as useful terminology, and how does this kind of thinking relate to what you have been talking about?

Hardt I’ve been trying to present the work for a few years as being oriented towards democracy – that’s the goal, and global democracy in particular. It is interesting to me that many people have questioned this, like after I’ve given a talk in which I both lament the lack of and celebrate the possibilities of global democracy today. Several people have said to me, well, why are you so tied to democracy? Why democracy? In a way I didn’t expect that, and it reveals for me that I do have a dedication to the concept that I’m not willing to abandon. I guess I would put it in the category of concepts that have been distorted or even taken over by the enemy, or at least in a category of different political notions that are worth fighting over. People will say to me, why do you insist on democracy when democracy has come to mean Ronald Reagan’s freedom fighters, or when democracy has come to mean the freedom of capitalist movement, or when democracy has come to mean Samuel Huntington’s notions of democracy?

BardPolitik It seems to me that your vision of democracy would be the reverse, a kind of moment of crisis in the conservative violence of the political order. This is why we were thinking about February 15, when Jonathan Schell said that we were seeing the day “global democracy was born.” This is particularly interest-

ing when thinking about protest in terms of a moment where the flows and deployment of infrastructure cease and those who normally have no voice are heard.

Hardt There was a time when I would insist on a certain periodization and the differences between our political experience from that of modernity. On the one hand, I think that the possibility of democracy today is opened up by early modern European and North American discussions where the concept of democracy was shifted. I think there’s a very important shift that one recognizes, obviously maturing over many centuries, between the ancient notion of democracy and the modern Euro-North American one. The ancient notion of democracy was really of a limited ‘many.’ An example in Thucydides is when Pericles is talking about democracy: the distinctions between the three classical forms of government are: monarchy being ‘one’ (it’s a very geometric kind of thinking), oligarchy or aristocracy being the ‘few,’ and democracy being the ‘many,’ but not all.

An extremely important shift, one that is perhaps never realized in modernity, is when democracy as the rule of the ‘many’ becomes democracy as the rule of all. Which, as a sort of universalization of the concept, seems to me extremely important. The most extreme example is Spinoza, who talks about democracy as absolute, meaning that it is not restricted in any way, that it is an absolute concept covering all of society. That is one aspect, I think, that is posed as a condition for democracy today: that it not be the rule of ‘many,’ but instead be the rule of ‘all.’ One could say that even if various revolutionaries in the early modern period from France to North America endorsed that notion, they quickly negated it in practice. In any case, I think it remains as a pressure on the concept. So in that way I think we, at least conceptually, are in continuity with a certain modern tradition about what democracy means.

On the other hand, in modern political thought and practice, democracy was really indistinguishable from the national terrain, and it seemed impossible to think it outside of the nation. Whereas

today I think we *have* to see it outside of the nation – it no longer makes sense to talk about democracy in the nation. In fact, I like the old Trotskyist-anti-Stalin slogan, when they used to say they were against socialism in one country. I think I could say that I’m against democracy in one country. It doesn’t make sense for its own survival, the way socialism couldn’t exist in one country. If it is going to exist today it *has* to be global. Now, and this is where I would insist on periodization, I think it requires a serious rethinking of the concept. What can democracy mean on a global scale, as opposed to on a national terrain?

One shouldn’t assume that the institutions that function in the nation-state will necessarily function for democracy on a global terrain. In fact, I’m somewhat sympathetic with various proposals for global democracy and institutional forms of it that are circulating today, like global parliament, alliance of NGOs, and various things like this. But I think that the vast majority of them, if not all, suffer from the problem that they are repeating the modern concept at a different level. It is as if what worked in the nation-state can now be expanded. I think that it’s a losing proposition. The comparison I would make is, and this is where I am going into my insistence on periodization, is that the early moderns – mostly the seventeenth and eighteenth century Europeans and North Americans – draw on this ancient notion of democracy. But they don’t just repeat it as it was, so that the move from the city-state to the nation-state required a complete conceptual and institutional transformation. The same thing is needed today. It would be like proposing a global parliament today that would be like the House of Representatives on a global scale; it would be like proposing to do what Athenians did, but let’s do it on a national scale. It’s a lack of the imagination necessary for the transformation.

BardPolitik How do you see this in terms of sovereignty?

Hardt This is something that Toni and I have been talking about. It seems to us that the entire tradition

of political theory back to the ancients assumes that only the ‘one’ can rule. And whether that ‘one’ be the monarch, or the state, or the party, or even the people – but the people considered as one, as a unifiable representation – this thinking is a necessary undermining of democracy. You say “yes, democracy,” but the people rule only as one unit by voice, or the people only rule as represented; this undermines the notion that the ‘many’ or ‘all’ is actually ruling. I think what has to be done, and this is in a way a conceptual task that the notion of the multitude has to accomplish, is to insist that the ‘many’ that rule do not only come from ‘one.’

You say “yes, democracy,” but the people rule only as one unit by voice, or the people only rule as represented; this undermines the notion that the ‘many’ or ‘all’ is actually ruling.

I was thinking of it even in terms of common expressions that we have, such as “too many cooks ruin the broth.” You can think of all kinds of instances where you assume that the decision is made by the ‘one.’ It is precisely this: where the decision requires the ‘one’ to decide, the many, the parliamentary, or even the voice can’t decide. We think that one has to confront this problem and demonstrate that, in fact, a plurality – even a multitude – *can* decide. It’s a challenging problem, but it seems to me that even before solving the problem, it’s the only real way to talk about democracy. If you talk about democracy in any other terms, I think you are – maybe not lying – but fooling yourself.

BardPolitik You would argue that Empire already functions this way.

Hardt It does, right.

BardPolitik Even if, ideologically speaking, we are unaware of it.

Hardt In the way it creates the fictions of centralization and, in fact, rules in a distributed form. One important thing this brings up is that, in a way, decentralization and the ‘many’ deciding sounds liberatory or progressive. But it can be exactly the opposite. This is something that Toni and I were very conscious of, but I think it is difficult for readers to grasp. The distributed network has at least two faces, and one of them, especially its form of control, is quite difficult to grapple with, while the other has its own liberatory potential. It is true that Empire functions in this distributed form, but always as a restricted form. Empire is not the rule of all; even if it is distributed, it doesn’t mean that everyone is the same. Networks also function with hierarchies. This would be at least two things to distinguish the rule of the multitude from the rule of Empire. The rule of the multitude would require an equality among agents in the network, and it would require a universality in the network of power.

BardPolitik At the same time, Empire is contingent on an already existing multitude for the functioning of its machinery.

Hardt It isn’t easy to explain, though. I think that the model of thought Toni and I are working with is really the way that Marx thinks of Capital as being dependant on the proletariat. It is quite obvious, then, that the relationship between Capital and the proletariat is not one of pure oppression, domination, or repression, because the proletariat is necessary for the production of Capital. Capital can’t just kill them; it can’t just exclude them. In fact, it’s not about exclusion at all; the relationship between Capital and the proletariat has to be one of inclusion – of subordinated exploited inclusion. Then again one has to change this because it is rather a different context – we aren’t just talking economically about the relationship between Empire and the multitude.

BardPolitik We were reasoning that when one discusses a new democratic structure – one that is global and inclusive – there is a necessity for the old structure of sovereignty as we know it, on the national level, to end. There would have to be an alternative to sovereignty. Is this a correct way of thinking?

Hardt I guess I would say that democracy is antithetical to sovereignty. But then, one would have to ask, are you just making an argument for anarchism in a conceptual sense, like no government, no regulation? No, but our argument is probably closer to certain historical forms of anarchism for which people have argued, because most of its strains are about forms of social relations based on freedom, equality, etc. In any case, our understanding of society is not just dependent on sovereignty in the same way that sovereignty is not the only possibility for the organization of society.

BardPolitik Where can we locate the relationship between what you see as the condition of democracy, the condition of the rule of all, and praxis? In other words, what do you see as ways of realizing these new forms of social relations?

Hardt The most important thing one has to look at is this: what are the possibilities – not only of protest – for the development and the creation of alternatives to the present system. It’s not that the protests aren’t important; it’s just the recognition that the protests aren’t sufficient. But there are some, and I would agree with them even if one has to limit one’s enthusiasm, that point to Porto Alegre and the World Social Forum as the model of and construction of an alternative. I think there are some examples in which the globalization movements have already in small ways made this transition from protest to alternatives – from anti-globalization to *alternative* globalization. And Porto Alegre is the prime symbol of that. I think that this is important and indicative, but not by itself.

Nonetheless, what seems to me most significant now – and existing – is the desire for a different

globalization, and a desire for democracy. And I think that what we have with February 15 is not only the very wide global expression – a protest of what’s now – but rather a desire for something different. It hasn’t yet assumed a form; it needs now an object: it needs an alternative. But the existence of the desire already seems to me an extremely important thing.

Kelly Burdick is an editor of Bard Politik. While at BGIA, he interned at NationBooks. Armando Mastrogiovanni is a senior at Bard College, majoring in literature.