

# Societies in Revolt: Contrasting the Detached Attitude of the Subversive 1970s Movements and the Contentious Movements of the 2010s

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*If We Burn: The Mass Protest Decade and the Missing Revolution* by Vincent Bevins, London: Wildfire, 2023, 352pp, £16.99 (paperback) ISBN: 139781541788978

*The Subversive Seventies* by Michael Hardt, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, 312pp, £21.99 (hardcover) ISBN: 9780197674659

## Introduction – The Failure and Defeat of Mass Protest Movements

It is more than evident that in recent years a lot of studies have been grappling with the global surge of mass movements. In this review essay, I analyse two such works, which hold distinguishable views on the movements that they analyse. The authors are on one hand a journalist, Vincent Bevins (2023), and on the other a veteran scholar, Micheal Hardt (2023), whose notable work with Antonio Negri is widely celebrated in leftist academic quarters. While both works adhere to distinct leftist political viewpoints and are global in scope, the former is interested in the failure and repercussions experienced by movements in the 2010s, while the latter excavates the tactics of movements from the 1970s with the premise that even if many were indeed defeated, they might still inform movements in the present. From the outset it can be noted that the distinction between failure and defeat is an important prism of analysis for Hardt, and less for Bevins. According to Hardt (2023), failure is the sign of an internal dysfunction within a movement, while defeat is more characterised by external counter-revolutionary forces. Consequently, his argument is that the defeated live on and might ‘become subterranean, which have the potential to spring forth again’ (p. 11). Bevins, on the other hand, regards the failure of movements in the 2010s as the end of the line, further sustained by the unintended and undesirable consequences that followed in the cases he treats.

A main thread of interest to this essay is the manner in which the movements cited in both works are similarly, but also distinguishably, described as interacting with power through an attitude of

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detachment. In Bevins' (2023) case, although the movements analysed face power head on through traditional modes of resistance, such as mass direct actions, for the large part those taking part are indifferent to the prospect of transforming power. A striking quote that encapsulates this situation comes from a Brazilian activist, whom Bevins quotes, 'we had planned every single detail, down to the moment we would succeed. But we had absolutely no plan for what came after that' (p. 136). In other words, the participants were completely detached from the idea of constructing a solid base for liberation. By contrast, the subversive movements outlined by Hardt (2023) 'seek to dismantle and overthrow the social structures of domination while, at the same time, constructing the bases for liberation' (p. 2). Thus, in this case, importance is shown towards a base that actively seeks to become detached from power through 'experiments with alternative social and political relations on the path to liberation' (p. 2).

In section 'From 'Under the Paving Stones, the Beach' to 'If We Burn, You Burn With Us'', I outline Bevins' take on the global contentious movements of the 2010s and highlight how in most cases their utter detachment from power results in what he perceives as failure. In section 'The Lessons of the Seventies', I move on to discuss Hardt's positive outlook of movements from the 1970s and what in his view can still offer to us in the present. Detachment in this case also plays a role, this time by preserving the necessary autonomy of movements to succeed in articulating problems and coming up with strategies to tackle them. In section 'Conclusion: Negotiating Detachment', I conclude the review essay by noting that detachment or indifference to power on the left must be acknowledged and better negotiated within movements.

## **From 'Under the Paving Stones, the Beach' to 'If We Burn, You Burn With Us'**

Similar to how many commentators in the aftermath of May '68 in France voiced their disappointment and wondered where all the revolutionary energy had ended, Vincent Bevins (2023), whose main interest lies in movements between 2010 and 2020, goes a step further by asking 'how is it possible that so many mass protests apparently led to the opposite of what they asked for' (p. 3)? Although Brazil comprises the central narrative of the book, with the author himself often seen deploying a Howard Becker type of participant observation, he further travels the globe in search of interviewing participants from diverse movements such as those in Chile, Egypt, Turkey and Hong Kong. The resulting narrative history of the contentious decade allows Bevins to highlight a set of commonalities between the movements in question: horizontally organised, leaderless, spontaneous and digitally coordinated. Moreover, unlike the utopian outlook of the movements of the 60s, as famously captured in the slogan 'under the paving stones, the beach', Bevins is often seen interacting with exhausted participants who are uncertain of what their future holds and that therefore have nothing to lose if as Hong Kong activist coined: 'if we burn, you burn with us'.

The crisis of movements for Bevins stems from a fundamental problem with their horizontal structure. The 'tyranny of structurlessness', as several interviewees throughout the book confess to the author in different ways, creates multiple issues for the original genuine spirit and success of a revolt (p. 243). The 2013 'bus fare' protests in Sao Paulo, Brazil, were organised by leftist and anarchist activists, which at first the media perceived as troublemakers. The violent police crackdown that followed further changed the perception of the media, who was now advocating the right to protest. Consequently, as Bevins recounts, millions came into the street for support, but this was not the left responding, but a mix of people that birthed the right-wing Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL). Similarly, in Turkey at Gezi Park, the mix of different people blending together, which ranged from violent football ultras to middle-class non-violent activists, were not sure of each

other's role and behaviour. As summed up by Zeynep Tufekci, a Turkish sociologist, these same issues were identical to what had happened in other countries: 'I felt that it could have been in almost any twenty-first-century protest square: organized through Twitter, filled with tear gas, leaderless, networked, euphoric and fragile' (p. 113).

A clear theme that runs through the book, often in consequence to the horizontal structure of movements, is the detached attitude with which the left-leaning crowd involved in mass actions perceive power. In short, a courageous willingness to confront power but wanting nothing to do with it at the same time. This detachment brings about or facilitates another prominent issue, which is that of recuperation or co-optation. In Brazil, the bus fare movement, the *Movimento Passe Livre* (MPL), who, as briefly noted in the introduction, had no plan for what came after a potential victory, was recuperated almost on the spot by the less power-shy *Movimento Brasil Livre* (MBL). In Bevins' words, the MBL 'were clearly appropriating the language, posture and repertoire of contention that entered the national consciousness in 2013. But these were not anti-authoritarian, self-funded punks and committed horizontalists who would rather seek to exist than tell anyone what to do' (pp. 177–178). Moreover, 'they got money from some of Brazil's richest people (and right-wing institutions in the United States) to pursue clear political goals' (p. 178). The latter political goals are seminal since 'history continues to unfold after the explosion' (p. 258).

This brings us to the repercussions, or to how it is put in the subtitle of the book: the missing revolution. In the aftermath of the bus fare protests in Sao Paolo, the democratically elected president Dilma Rousseff was impeached, the ex-president Lula da Silva was jailed and eventually a far-right contender, Jair Bolsonaro, got elected as president. When 9 years later Bevins asked two participants what they had learned, a similar answer followed: 'There is no such thing as a political vacuum' (p. 263). As he further adds, 'unclaimed political power exerts an irresistible gravitational pull on anyone who might want it, and at every moment in recorded history, someone has wanted it' (p. 263). Thus, an aimless and unorganised attitude of detachment towards power leaves the vacuum prone to a host of different actors who are nothing but indifferent to the possibility of exercising power. In Bevins' view, caution is therefore recommended to those aspiring for a revolution without a solid plan of action, which is why with the same caution he seems to favour political representation and a Leninist mode of organisation for a better chance at succeeding.

## The Lessons of the Seventies

A question that Michael Hardt deals with early on in his book is the reason he wishes to specifically underscore the relevance of movements in the 1970s, as opposed to for instance those in the 1960s. In his words, 'the 60s belong to a past world, not ours', while 'the 1970s, in contrast, mark the beginning of our time' (p. 10). Hardt notes how the period of the 70s was when a 'postindustrial society' started to take shape, with 'labor and wage regimes' shifting from 'Fordist to post-Fordist models, initiating an era of increasingly precarious and informal forms of employment' (p. 10). Moreover, the neoliberal stage started to be set more concretely through 'privatizing public goods, undermining welfare structures, and increasing the gap between rich and poor, while making the state less responsive to social demands and progressive reforms' (p. 10). What Hardt is after is highlighting 'continuities with the present, emphasizing instances in which movements of the seventies invented early forms of practices and strategies' that later became 'central in twenty-first-century movements' (p. 11).

Similar to the commonalities that Bevins points between the global movements of the 2010s, Hardt evaluates a different set of 'coherent patterns' through 'the concepts that are produced by and circulate among the movements' (p. 7). The concepts that were specifically theorised within the movements – autonomy, multiplicity, democracy and liberation – are according to Hardt seminal for

understanding their long-lasting value and importance. Hardt concurs with Robin DG Kelley, whom he cites in connection with how movements are often retrospectively judged on if they succeed in realising their vision or not, rather than on the substance of that vision (p. 6). Consequently, he notes how ‘those visions remain alive and strong beyond defeat: the long history of revolutionary movements teaches us that a defeat, however devastating, is never an endpoint’ (p. 6). As argued in the case of past rebel groups in Mozambique, Angola and Guinea-Bissau against the Portuguese colonial rule, according to Hardt contemporary societies must learn that concepts such as

popular power, revolutionary democracy, and collective leadership . . . posed not only the goals to be realized but also the educational processes needed to prepare the way, which are equally important today. Colonial populations, after all, are not alone in being unprepared for institutions of robust self- rule. In all contemporary societies, just as much as a half century ago, a project for revolutionary democracy has to create its own preconditions by transforming the political capacities of the population through some kind of militant education. Only then would we be prepared for a leap toward a revolutionary democracy. (p. 23)

Thus, long-term militant education, as opposed to blind faith in spontaneous action and aimless detachment from power, is for Hardt paramount when it comes to achieving revolutionary goals.

Yet Hardt’s subversive movements are also detached from power, but in a distinguishable manner from their counterparts in the 2010s. The difference lies precisely in how the former detach to autonomously transform power. For instance, as Hardt recounts, in 1973, the Lip watch factory workers in France ‘needed to achieve autonomy from the unions and parties in order to exercise their democratic political capacities’ (p. 105). When they felt the pressure of union directives, the workers chanted “‘Lip will not be Grenelle” . . . referring to the union accords that ended the May 1968 strikes against the wishes of many workers’ (p. 105). In fact, they subsequently proceeded to run the plant themselves by creating ‘a system whereby they rotated work stations and responsibilities while also slowing down the line. They used the greater power they had won to make life in the factory less mechanical and more human’ (p. 105).

Other opposition movements that were indifferent to ‘standard models of protest and did not appeal to the state through established political channels or public demonstrations’ are the Sanrizuka (Japan) and Larzac (France) collectives (p. 183). What they did instead is ‘they took direct action by creating semipermanent encampments defending the territory by physically obstructing’ for nearly a decade the construction of an airport, in the case of the former, and a military base, in the case of the latter (p. 183). Reminiscent of the encampments in multiple universities around Europe and the United States in 2024, Hardt highlights their value by adding how ‘in addition to being defensive structures’, encampments serve as ‘cauldrons of innovation, creating new alliances, transforming the repertoires of political practice, and generating novel social forms’ (p. 183). Thus, as opposed to Bevins, who signals the need for leftist movements to hark back to a more centralised structure, Hardt persists on the importance of decentralised organisation, but with an emphasis on identifying and articulating political problems like the movements in the seventies.

## Conclusion: Negotiating Detachment

Famously, in an interview with Sassine Farès, Michel Foucault (2018) uttered that ‘there can’t be, and we shouldn’t wish there to be, societies without uprisings’ (p. 343). He further remarked that ‘people must invent both what they can and will rise up against and what they’ll transform their uprising into. Or what they’ll direct this uprising towards. It’s to be reinvented indefinitely’ (p. 343). This is very much Hardt’s (2023) line of thought throughout his book, in which he deems our relation to seventies movements ‘as being like that of runners in a relay race. They were able to

carry the baton only so far. Now it's up to us to complete the next leg of the journey' (p. 257). Crucial for the success of movements is them conceiving and formulating problems that lead to a 'common struggle without priority among them' (p. 255). Staying relatively detached from power conserves one's autonomy and helps executing the strategies. In the case of the movements treated by Bevins (2023), detachment created a power vacuum that was hijacked by groups that were far more organised. Even if Bevins remains somewhat vague and acknowledges that centralised organisation can be a *pharmakon*, towards the end of the book he tellingly states that 'if you refuse to use the tools that work, you are not really building; you are refusing to take responsibility, and you are ceding your power to other people' (pp. 284–285). In contrast to Hardt, Bevins cannot conceive of a scenario in which a detached attitude towards power preserves autonomy and provides the ground for the alternative building of a solid base for liberation. To acknowledge and negotiate the extent of detachment shown towards power is what is precisely paramount for autonomous collectives and initiatives to flourish beyond the burst of a revolt. Consequently, horizontal self-governance might still be highly effective, if sustained by long-term political and militant education.

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