

Back to the future?

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Empire

Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000

Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race

Paul Gilroy

London: Penguin, 2000

There was a time when the energies of the Left were wholly invested in envisioning and bringing into being a new social order in which differences such as those of class, race and gender were either effaced or rendered irrelevant. For some time now, however, the more interesting intellectual debates have been concerned with 'difference'—with the ethical imperative to recognise and attend to it rather than subsume it, and with critiques of modernity, Enlightenment and so on, which can be seen as having ignored or sought to efface it. Both the books here are at odds with that concern. They are so not because they think a concern with difference is inherently misplaced, but rather because they argue that certain dramatic social changes mean that our relation to this concern should also be changing. For Hardt and Negri the logic of globalisation is not only inexorable, but desirable—the forward march of capitalism in the form of a deterritorialised global empire also leads to the possibilities of an intensified resistance by the proletariat, here redesignated as the 'multitude'. The endpoint is a cosmopolitan communism not unlike that envisioned by Marx. Theories such as postcolonialism and post-modernism, concerned with deconstructing the binary logic through which the modern is thought and lived, are tilting at windmills, for the new capitalism which has developed itself deconstructs binaries, just as it dissolves territories and all fixity. For Paul Gilroy, 'raciology'—by which he means not only racism but all forms of thinking and practice which accord race significance—is in crisis, and we now have the opportunity to leave it behind once and for all. Although using race, ethnicity and culture once gave the victims of racism some critical purchase, this now yields ever

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diminishing returns. Gilroy envisions a supersession of differences in a new universalism which he designates as 'planetary humanism'.

It may just be coincidence, or it may mark a shift in the intellectual mood of our times, that both the books featured here seek to go 'beyond' the contemporary concern with difference and that in both cases, the 'going beyond' involves a 'return' to earlier visions of universalism and cosmopolitanism. To be sure, the 'return' is no simple one, for these are theoretically and politically sophisticated works. Hardt and Negri are well aware that globalisation has usually meant Europeanisation, and Gilroy is keenly aware that humanism and colonialism went hand in hand, and draws our attention to that fact. These authors aim not to reinstate universalisms as if their critiques had never happened or were simply in error, but rather point to new forms of human solidarity that surpass difference, rather than suppressing it. Even so, it will be my contention that some of these arguments are unconvincing. Whether the (re)instatement of humanism and universalism is desirable and feasible still requires that we think through difference, and (to declare my own commitments) postcolonial theory is still a necessary element in this rethinking. The project of accounting for difference has not yet exhausted itself, and therefore it is too early as yet to 'return to the future'.

The central argument of *Empire* is signalled by its title: imperialism is over, and has been replaced by Empire. Globalisation has meant that states' control over their territory is becoming increasingly ineffective, but this has led not to sovereignty disappearing, but rather to its being coded and exercised in historically novel ways: 'Our basic hypothesis is that sovereignty has taken a new form, composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule. This new global form of sovereignty is what we call Empire' (p xii). The novelty of this lies in the fact that sovereignty exists without territory—'In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a *decentered* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global system within its open, expanding frontiers' (p xii), and its defining feature is precisely that it has no location—'Empire is an *ou-topia*, or really a *non-place*' (p 190).

This political transformation is intimately linked with other transformations, including the increasing importance of the service sector (itself an aspect of what the authors label the 'informalization of production'), and hence of the 'immaterial labour' which produces such immaterial goods (p 290), which in turn is directly connected with the 'mass refusal of the disciplinary regime' which began in the 1960s. The social movements spawned then and since destroyed an existing regime of production (including the production of subjectivities) and invented another (p 275). Even this brief mention of a few aspects of the Hardt/Negri account of how capitalism has changed serves to convey something of the nature of the analysis, one in which everything is connected with everything else (although the nature of the connections is often rather imprecise), and where every page is crackling with intellectual energy. The more general point to emerge is that any distinctions between 'economic' and 'political' and 'cultural' (let alone base and superstructure) is increasingly inappropriate, because it is the nature of this new beast that all these are intertwined with each other, so that the production and reproduction of power also produces subjectivity and material and immaterial commodities: 'In Empire and

