

## Interview - Michael Hardt

Written by E-International Relations

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Michael Hardt is a political philosopher and literary theorist based at Duke University and the European Graduate Institute. He is best known for his collaboration with Antonio Negri, with whom he wrote the Empire trilogy. His work has been linked with autonomist Marxism. His most recent book is Declaration, co-written with Antonio Negri, which refers to the Occupy and other social movements. He currently serves as the editor of the South Atlantic Quarterly.

**How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

Maybe more significant for me is something that hasn't changed. When Toni Negri and I were writing Empire, in the late 1990s, our first intuition was that the United States would soon no longer be able to dictate global affairs, that it could no longer "go it alone," unilaterally. But we didn't therefore think that some other nation-state, such as China, would occupy that position or even that a multilateral alliance among dominant nation-states would be able to control global affairs. Our hypothesis instead was that a network of powers was emerging – including the dominant nation-states together with supranational institutions, corporations, NGOs, and other non-state actors – to control global relations in a shifting and contingent way.

We saw this as a challenge to the "realist" hypothesis that states are the central actors in international politics. States certainly remain important, but our claim was that if you focus only on the actions of states you miss what is really going on.

That basic premise hasn't changed. But the composition of Empire, that is, the composition of the global power structures is constantly in flux. The hierarchies and interactions among states, the position of non-state actors, the sway of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank – these and other factors must be tracked and evaluated continually.

**You have been mostly associated with autonomist Marxism, people related to this tendency have recently adopted the slogan by 16th century Thomas Muntzer "omnia sunt communia" roughly translated "everything should be in common". What do you think of this sentence and how would you explain its significance?**

I see demands for the common emerging from a wide range of quarters today. At its most basic the common names forms of wealth that we share and that we manage democratically. And that makes the common fundamentally opposed, on the one hand, to private property and, on the other, to public (or state) property. One field of demands for the common, for instance, involves immaterial forms of wealth such as scientific knowledges, information, cultural products, code, and the like. Another field regards the earth and its ecosystems and foresees only democratic solutions to our shared interactions with and care for the environment. Finally, I recognize all of the recent social movements involving urban encampments and occupations, from Tahrir Square to Gezi Park and passing through Puerta del sol and Zuccotti Park, as aimed (in part) at making the city itself common, that is, making urban space open to all and subject to democratic forms of management.

It's key in any of these discussions of the common to emphasize the need for democratic decision-making. Systems

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of open access and mechanisms of sharing wealth, in other words, are not spontaneous and must be managed in order to last. Whereas private property establishes a monopoly over decision-making, the common requires democratic mechanisms.

**Since the publication of *Empire*, the meaning you and Antonio Negri attach to the concept of multitude has changed over time, could you shortly explain what you mean by multitude and trace its evolution in your thinking?**

By multitude we intend a plural project of political organization. This might be best understood as an extension – or, really, a pluralization – of three traditional concepts: the people, the class, and the party. Multitude is not really opposed to these three concepts but rather designates plural, internally heterogeneous versions of each of them. Often “the people,” for instance, has been used to refer to a relatively homogenous population to the exclusion of others. The term the “English people” as used in political discourses, for example, has often implicitly or explicitly designated a white population. The term “working class” has similarly often served to name not all workers but primarily male, industrial workers. Finally, the party has generally designated a centralized, unified, and hierarchical form of political organization. Multitude is intended to reconceive these terms in a plural and democratic key: a people that is internally heterogeneous and open to those outside; a class that grasps all forms of labor, waged and unwaged; and a democratic, horizontal party form.

So-called leaderless movements of recent years are certainly treading on this terrain, but none of them has arrived yet at creating lasting and effective forms of organization. The multitude is not spontaneous and the term is not meant to name something that already exists. It rather designates the lines of a project to be constructed.

**In recent years we have seen an increased interaction between social movements and political parties around Europe, for example, Podemos in Spain. How do you see a movement-party like Podemos evolving in the coming years?**

I see Podemos as a wager or an experiment that will measure the extent to which electoral projects can help social movements flourish. On the one hand, it is true that Podemos is born, in many respects, from the 15M movement, that is, the encampments in major Spanish cities in the summer of 2011, and from the many forms of activism that followed this, such as the “mareas” in education and health. (The 2015 municipal government electoral victories of Barcelona en comú and Ahora Madrid are important demonstrations of the power of these movements in electoral politics.) On the other hand, Podemos also has some of the centralized structures of traditional political parties.

The wager, then, is double. First, it is simply that the social movements can carry Podemos to a position of power in national elections. Second, the wager is that an electoral party like Podemos can not so much represent the movements but instead create space for them to flourish. Neither of these results is assured, but the wager certainly seems to me worth the risks.

**What is your opinion on the Kurdish PYD and the society they created in Northern-Syria? A group that adopted the language of autonomy and direct democracy while hailing from a more traditional Marxist-Leninist political background.**

Like so many others, I was inspired by the defense of Kobane in 2014-15 by Kurdish forces against those of the Islamic State. But the military prowess and heroism interests me less than the political innovations both in Turkey and in Rojava (Northern Syria). One of the most significant developments in my view took place at a theoretical level a decade ago when the Kurdish movement shifted its objective from “national liberation” to “democratic autonomy.” The conceptual move from sovereignty to autonomy is extremely important. (The relation between those two concepts could be the subject of a very interesting study in political theory.) And even more important is how the notion of democratic autonomy is articulated in practice. Kurdish communities have indeed been experimenting with new democratic forms. For example, in order to combat gender inequality, every post in the governance structures in Rojava must be occupied by one man and one woman as co-chairs. Those kinds of experiments make the Kurdish movement today one of the leading pioneers in new forms of democracy.

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**You have been quite politically active as an academic. What do you think of the relation between academia and political commitment? Does there rest a certain responsibility for engagement in academics because of their relatively privileged position?**

I don't think "responsibility" is the right frame for thinking about this. And since academics as a whole are not more capable than others of political engagement then it would not be helpful to hold them responsible.

In fact, I think it is important to break a standard assumption of a divide between theory and practice by which intellectuals are authors of theory and activists engage in practice. In my view some of the most innovative theorizing today goes on collectively in movements. Academics have a lot to learn not only from what activists do but also from how they think and from the knowledges they produce.

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*This interview was conducted by Tom Cassauwers. Tom is an Associate Features Editor of E-IR.*