

Capital sive Natura: Spinoza and the Immanence of Empire
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“Destroying them in words is as urgent as doing so in deeds.”¹

1.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* presents a significant effort to respond adequately to the phenomena collectively known as “globalization.” Its central thesis is that power in the present political juncture is a matter of radical immanence. This has two interrelated consequences. On the one hand, “politics does not disappear; what disappears is any notion of the autonomy of the political” (307). On the other hand, “it is ... no longer possible to identify a sign, a subject, a value, or a practice that is ‘outside’” (385). In short: there is no longer anything but politics, and politics must be conducted without reference to transcendental signifiers. There is no transcendent space, either for politics or for theory. In its negative aspect, this thesis indicts both liberalism and its postmodern critique. Liberalism tends toward a “bourgeois metaphysics” according to which there is a “bizarre naturalness of capitalism” paired with the thought that there is “no alternative to the present form of rule except a blind anarchic other” (386-7). In other words, liberalism naturalizes all of the evils of the present world order, and presents “a pure and simple mystification” of which “we have to disabuse ourselves ... right away” (387). Postmodernism, which critiques metanarratives, finds itself *aufgehoben* by actual events: power itself no longer works through a legitimating modernist metanarrative, but instead “rules through differential hierarchies of the hybrid and fragmentary subjectivities that these theorists celebrate” (138). Identity groups and “play” both become instrumentalized by capital as loci of disciplined production and consumption,

¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 2000), 404.

such that “the celebratory affirmations of postmodernists can easily appear naïve, when not purely mystificatory” (142-3).² In its positive aspect, *Empire* attempts to develop a form of critique which is adequate to what it calls the politics of the “multitude.” Such critique would work within the biopolitical space generated by “the complete commingling of the political, the social, and the economic in the constitution of the present” (387). It would be nothing short of a new “material mythology of reason” (396), which would enable the amorphous multitude both to resist disciplinary control and “to express itself as activity and consciousness” (*ibid.*).

These are sweeping claims, and as Hardt and Negri suggest, “the book invites and even demands critiques. It proposes such a large framework that it is bound to solicit different views at the highest and lowest levels of analysis.”³ Here, I will neither attack nor defend the text’s theoretical synthesis *per se*. Rather, I want to develop the thought that *Empire* poses a prior question of critique, presenting itself not only as a new theoretical synthesis, but also as embodying a new form of theoretical practice. The strengths and weaknesses of the text are both located in what turns out to be a very complex relationship between this theoretical synthesis and its practice. The first questions that must be posed of *Empire* thus concern how to read it, and what new “mythology of reason” it enacts.⁴ One

² The status of postcolonial theory is more ambiguous: for a sympathetic critique of *Empire*’s treatment of postcolonial narratives, see Sanjay Seth, “Back to the Future?” *Third World Quarterly* 23 (2002), 565-575; rpt. in *Debating Empire*, *infra* note 3, 43-51; see also the critical remarks in Peter Fitzpatrick, “The Immanence of *Empire*,” in *Empire’s New Clothes*, *infra* note 3, 41ff.

³ “The Rod of the Forest Warden: A Response to Timothy Brennan,” *Critical Inquiry* 29 (2003), 368-373: 368. A considerable literature has in fact emerged around the book; two recent volumes collect many of the critical discussions: *Debating Empire*, ed. Gopal Balakrishnan (London: Verso, 2003) and *Empire’s New Clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri*, ed. Paul A. Passavant and Jodi Dean (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁴ For an illuminating discussion of *Empire*’s use of the “multitude” as such a myth, tracing a genealogy back to Sorel, see Kam Shapiro, “The Myth of the Multitude,” in *Empire’s New Clothes*, 289-314. Two points should be emphasized: (a) reading in the light of Sorel helps to explain *Empire*’s almost giddy optimism. Sorel writes: “men who are participating in a great social movement always picture their coming action as a battle in which their cause is certain to triumph. These constructions ... I propose to call myths” (qt. 304); (b) Shapiro is acutely

striking, and often criticized, aspect of *Empire*'s theoretical practice is its eclectic invocation of other voices. Such invocation invites a reading of the text that situates it in discursive community with those voices. Since the activity of the multitude is cast as expressive, consideration of the textual appropriations which produce the constellation of voices that *Empire* invokes should in turn help to illuminate at least that aspect of the text's theoretical synthesis. If it is true that (a) "the earthly city must demonstrate its power as an apparatus of mythology of reason that organizes the biopolitical reality of the multitude" (407), *i.e.*, that mythology is part of the realm of production; and (b) that the multitude demands a right to representation which is "first of all the right to the reappropriation of the means of production" (406), then one should view *Empire*'s textual practice as itself invoking this right through its invocation of other voices.

We should expect this reappropriation to violate our expectations of canonical interpretation, since these canonical readings will be the necessary products of *Empire*:

Here we are thus faced with a paradox. *Empire* recognizes and profits from the fact that in cooperation bodies produce more and in community bodies enjoy more, but it has to obstruct and control this cooperative autonomy so as not to be destroyed by it. Corruption operates to impede this going 'beyond measure' of the new bodies through community, this singular universalization of the new power of bodies, which threaten the very existence of *Empire*. The paradox is irresolvable: the more the world becomes rich, the more *Empire*, which is

aware of the risks of derailment, the that multitude, *qua* myth, might fail precisely those it is supposed to help ("Hardt and Negri never allow that the liberating flights of the multitude could give way to reactionary capture, much less harbor fascist tendencies," 308). Fitzpatrick, "Immanence," detects in the multitude an almost dialectical vacillation between unrepresentability and specific representations, between an amorphous beyond and specific abstractions. Similarly, Maurer, "On Divine Markets," *Empire's New Clothes*, 57-72, claims that the radical immanence of *Empire* is so flat that the text demonstrates the process of complete appropriation that it critiques: *Empire* becomes an example of *Empire*. Of course, Hardt and Negri themselves concede that *Empire*'s usage of "multitude" requires further elaboration: "it is still not at all evident how to understand the multitude in social and sociological terms. This appears to us now as the most significant shortcoming of the book" ("Sovereignty, Multitudes, Absolute Democracy," in *Empire's New Clothes*, 163-73: 173). I return to both of these issues in terms of their appropriation of Spinoza, and of the risk of the multitude becoming a new revolutionary subject, below.

based on this wealth, must negate the conditions of the production of wealth. Our task is to investigate how ultimately corruption can be forced to cede its control to generation (392).

This paradox operates at the production of academic and theoretical discourse as well, the production of which power requires, even enables, while at the same time regulating that production and impeding its full realization. Part of the task of *Empire* is to reappropriate this discourse. *Empire*'s theoretical synthesis and practice thus converge at the effort to produce such a cooperative autonomy of its sources. This convergence is particularly manifest in *Empire*'s appropriation of Deleuze, and, especially, of Deleuze's work on Spinoza. It is from these sources that *Empire* draws its concept of immanence, which means that to approach *Empire*, we need to approach Spinoza's *Ethics*, a text which, written at the beginning of modernity, increasingly seems to point beyond it.⁵

2.

The theoretical armature of *Empire* turns on two points. The first, developed in Marx's *Grundrisse* "Fragment on Machines," distinguishes between the formal and real

⁵ The Spinoza connection is somewhat underplayed in the literature on *Empire*. In view of this, let me indicate a few preliminary signposts. (a) I will interpret *Empire*'s reading of Spinoza primarily through Negri's earlier monograph on Spinoza, *The Savage Anomaly*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 1991). (b) A perusal of Negri's footnotes there indicates his considerable debt to Deleuze's *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1992). (c) An important intermediary figure is Karl Marx; I will not be assessing autonomous Marxism (of which Negri is the pre-eminent example) here (a short and sympathetic summary and critique can be found in Alex Callinicos, "Toni Negri in Perspective," in *Debating Empire*, 121-43). That said, the importance of Marx underscores the importance of Spinoza, as Spinoza's influence on Marx is demonstrable: see my "Marx's Anomalous Reading of Spinoza," *Interpretation* 28 (2000), 17-31. (d) Because my primary purpose is not to interpret Spinoza, I will in general refrain from detailed references to or engagement with the Spinoza scholarship, except as it pertains to Negri's usage of it here. I hope the following will indicate my sympathy with the general direction of Deleuze's and Negri's interpretations, even as I differ from Negri in particular on *Ethics* V.

subsumption of society by capital.⁶ In the first phase, “this subsumption is *formal* insofar as the labor process exists within capital, subordinated to its command *as an imported foreign force*, born outside of capital’s domain.”⁷ Social antagonism is expressed as capital imposes itself as a transcendental signifier on labor, which has to be bent to meet the structural requirements of capital; this tension is manifest in events such as workers’ strikes. In the phase of real subsumption, “the labor processes themselves are born within capital, and therefore ... labor is incorporated not as an external but as an internal force, proper to capital itself” (*ibid.*). Because all work is capitalist, social antagonism can only express itself in those who refuse work altogether, or who nomadically refuse to have their movements governed by capital (*Empire*, 393-413). In real subsumption, because the entire social structure is determined by capital, all productive activity is always already co-opted by capital. For example, developing personal webpages on one’s own time adds to the value of the internet and of the corporations that depend on it: in this sense, the internet is a device of surplus labor extraction.⁸ Negri describes real subsumption in an earlier work as follows:

Society appears to us as capital’s society. It is through this passage that all social conditions are subsumed by capital, that is, they become part of its ‘organic composition.’ ... Capital progressively subsumes all the elements and materials of the process of circulation ... and, thereafter, all those pertaining to the process of production, so that herein lies the foundation *for the passage from manufacture to big industry to social factory* (*Marx Beyond Marx*, 114; emphasis in original).

⁶ This thread runs throughout Negri’s writings; in addition to *Empire*, see especially *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, trans. Harry Cleaver, Michael Ryan and Maurizio Viano (New York: Autonomedia, 1991). For a critical discussion of Negri’s reading of the fragment in the context of *Empire*, see Nicholas Thoburn, “Autonomous Production? On Negri’s ‘New Synthesis,’” *Theory, Culture and Society* 18 (2001), 75-96.

⁷ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Labor of Dionysus : A Critique of the State-Form* (Minneapolis : U. Minnesota Press, 1994), 224.

⁸ See Tiziana Terranova, “Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy,” *Social Text* 63 (2000), 33-58.

In short, “capital constitutes society” (*ibid.*), and “capital is the totality of labor and life” (*op. cit.*, 122). The distinction between the two forms of subsumption, then, is as follows: in formal subsumption, capital appears as a universal, imposed on activity from outside. In real subsumption, capital is always already completely diffused in the socius, which means that all activity is always already coded as capitalist production.

This transition from transcendence to immanence echoes Spinoza. In his *Ethics*, Spinoza outlines three kinds of knowledge: the confusion of the passive affects (in which one is governed solely by the imaginative faculty); second-order concepts; and the intellectual activity *scientia intuitiva*, or “third order knowledge.”⁹ Both the progression and the distinctions are relevant. That there is a progression provides initial evidence that Spinozism cannot easily degenerate into anarchic mob rule, as some critics of *Empire* have worried.¹⁰ As Spinoza’s preface to the *Theological-Political Treatise* makes clear, one of Spinoza’s principal tasks is to understand and defuse the reasons why the multitude is normally held in a position of fear and superstition from which its apparent activities are in fact the reactions of a passive mob. The point is that in such condition, people remain fundamentally passive. He writes that “the supreme mystery of despotism ... is to keep men in a state of deception, and with the specious title of religion to cloak the fear by which they must be held in check, so that they will fight for their servitude as if for salvation.”¹¹ An affirmation of expression and of the multitude as actively and fully participating in knowledge production is therefore

⁹ See especially *Ethics* 2P41Sch 2. Spinoza, *Ethics and Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect and Selected Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1992) [=E, TIE]. Original text: Benedictus de Spinoza, *Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg, 1925). I have frequently modified the translation to bring out relevant textual points.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Malcolm Bull, “You Can’t Build a New Society with a Stanley Knife,” in *Debating Empire*, 83-96.

¹¹ *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 3.

precisely not an affirmation of the mob. To the contrary: *Empire's* affirmation of the multitude is an effort to free its productive activity from the despotism of capital.

Of Spinoza's distinctions, the important one here is between second and third order knowledge. Second order concepts conceive of "common notions and the adequate ideas of the properties of things" (E2P40Sch2), where, for example "motion" is taken to be common to all bodies. Such knowledge is, according to Spinoza, limited and abstract because it does not know things as they are in themselves, but only through reliance on universals: "when things are conceived in this abstract way and not through their true essence, they are at once confused by the imagination" (TIE 21g). Hence, to know something through a universal or a common notion is at most to know it as a token of a type, and in such an arrangement, skepticism about the adequation of the concept to its object is ineliminable.

In *Ethics V* ("On Human Freedom"), Spinoza attempts to outline a move past such reliance on universals. The full details of this move need not concern us here; I will note only two moments. First, "the more we understand singular things [*res singulares*], the more we understand God [= nature]" (E5P24).¹² Thus, the order of understanding is inverted from that of common notions: one seeks to understand singular things, not common notions, and this understanding of singular things is constitutive of knowledge of nature. Second, Spinoza writes:

¹² "God" here emphatically does *not* mean a transcendental lawgiver; Spinoza's critique of this notion in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* is well-known. "God" is synonymous with "nature," "*deus sive natura*," as Spinoza's text has it. See, e.g., E4Pfc and also Letter 6 to Oldenberg: "I do not differentiate between God and nature in the way all those known to me have done" (*Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 84). The distinction between God the lawgiver and God=nature is a paradigm case of the distinction between transcendence and immanence; to make the transition from one to the other is to move past reliance on passive affects and universals.

Our mind, insofar as it understands, is an eternal mode of thinking, which is determined by another eternal mode of thinking, and this again by another, and so on *in infinitum*; thus they all together constitute the eternal and infinite intellect of God (E5P40Sch).

The scholium is attached to a proposition which invites an emancipatory reading: “the more perfection a thing has, the more it acts and the less it is passive [*minus patitur*]. Conversely, the more it acts, the more perfect it is” (E5P40). The problems of *scientia intuitiva* are thus ontological and political rather than epistemological, which is to say that the move from second order knowledge to *scientia intuitiva* is also a move from transcendence to immanence. The principles of knowledge come from us.

On Deleuze’s reading, this move constitutes “the significance of Spinozism ... it asserts immanence as a principle and frees expression from any subordination to emanative or exemplary causality. Expression itself no longer emanates, no longer resembles anything” (*Expressionism*, 180). This is the precise sense of immanence developed in *Empire*: the non-reliance on a transcendental signifier to determine the differentiation of concepts. Expression is no longer the expression of a transcendently determined difference, but of its own self-differentiation. Deleuze adopts this language in *Difference and Repetition* as well, where he writes, “instead of something distinguished from something else, imagine something which distinguishes itself Lightning, for example, distinguishes itself from the black sky Difference is this state in which determination takes the form of unilateral distinction.”¹³ At the level of theory, such an understanding of expression/difference means that reliance on universal concepts is inadequate to the singularity of the objects they supposedly represent.

¹³ *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia UP 1994), 28.

This is the point of Spinoza's comment that it is the understanding of singular things, and not universals, which is the understanding of nature.

At the level of practice, immanence suggests the "radical democracy" or the "positivity of the multitude" advocated in *Empire*, as Spinoza's comment about our own activity itself constituting the intellect of God suggests. Importantly, Deleuze casts the Spinozist move in political terms:

Immanence is opposed to any eminence of the cause, any negative theology, any method of analogy, any hierarchical conception of the world. With immanence all is affirmation Participation must be thought of in a completely positive way, not on the basis of an eminent gift, but on the basis of a formal community that allows the distinction of essences to subsist (*Expressionism*, 174).

The thesis of *Empire* can now be put as follows: the transition from formal to real subsumption means that *capital itself* no longer has an emanative or hierarchical relation to the world. The world is capital, and this means precisely that capital itself encourages the production of distinct essences. The grounds for critique are that the differences which appear in capital are not real differences; rather, they are differences constituted by and within capital. The multitude must therefore *refuse constitution*, because to be constituted as a "subject" is already to concede the game to capital. This is the point of *Empire*'s affirmation of movement.

Empire describes the expressive activity of those who refuse constitution as joyous. Again, one source is Spinozist, and derives from passages such as those in which Spinoza refers to *scientia intuitiva* as the "intellectual love of God," and in terms which suggest that it poses the possibility of community for the first time. Hence, "this love towards God cannot be tainted with the affects of envy or jealousy, but is the more fostered as we think more men

to be joined to God by this same bond of love” (E5P20). This intellectual love is also its own end; as Spinoza puts it, beatitude, which “therefore consists in the love of God” (E5P42D) is “not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself” (E5P42). However, it is not self-evident how one is to understand beatitude in this context. At least two interpretive paths suggest themselves to Hardt and Negri. The first is taken by *Empire*, which, on “communist” grounds, declares the “innocence” of joy. Hence, the text affirms the “irrepressible lightness and joy of being communist,” and that “militancy makes resistance into counterpower and makes rebellion into a project of love” (413). Thus understood, the multitude is not a revolutionary subject, but an affirmation of community which in turn affirms itself as community. That said, such affirmation also carries the greatest risk of cooption and derailment, of regression into a revolutionary subject. How does one refer to a difference from capital, when the entire referential field is coded by capital?

Presumably, this move to pure, innocent joy is an effort to minimize the risk of regression. Hardt and Negri identify what they take to be such a regressive undercurrent in Spinoza’s *Ethics*: “in this final part of the *Ethics*, this utopia has only an abstract and indefinite relation to reality” (*Empire*, 186). This thought dates to *Savage Anomaly*, in which Negri claims that the concluding sections of the *Ethics* are marked by a “strong ascetic tension that reappears and runs throughout the text The ascetic tries to dislodge, in cognitive and moral terms, that which is ontologically fixed” (*Savage*, 169).¹⁴ The ascetic tension names the possibility that intellectual love of God will lapse back into an externally defined or transcendently represented subjectivity; the orthodox Marxist revolutionary subject would

¹⁴ For the inverse thought – that the French/Italian Marxist Spinoza is *less* materialist than Spinoza himself, see Julie Klein “Étienne Balibar’s Marxist Spinoza,” *Philosophy Today* 44 Supp. (2000), 41-50; and Idit Dobbs-

exemplify such a lapse. Negri tries to uproot it in Spinoza by arguing that it appears only as a residuum, superseded by the theoretical progress of the remainder of the text. Hence, of the passage about the impossibility of envy and jealousy, Negri writes that “this proposition, which appears at the center of the ascetic construction of the cognitive process, inverts the scene of it: knowledge rises to the divinity, to a higher of level of being, only to the extent that it traverses the level of imagination, the social level, and lets itself be constructed by them” (*Savage*, 173). Radicalizing this inversion, *Empire* resolves the tension between ontological and ascetic moments definitively in favor of the ontological; one consequence is the purity and innocence of the “joy of being communist.”

The extirpated ascetic presents the other reading of “joy,” as ethical and regulated by a transcendental signifier. Hence, Negri refers disparagingly to the ascetic provisional moral, its “overdetermination of the imagination” and its role as “a justification, an extrinsic motivation of the ethical process, which is employed until the ethical process has reached the solidity of the immediate relationship between essence and existence, or their identity which has no justification other than itself” (*Savage*, 174). Importantly, it is not self-evident that such a characterization exhausts Spinoza’s ethical. Certainly one mode of ethics affirms its responsibility to the orderly community and transcendent God of the Cartesian *morale par provision*. But what if this ascetic dimension instead refers to a responsibility to singular things in their material singularity? This possibility poses a third alternative for understanding Spinozist joy. There are certainly Spinozist grounds for such an interpretive move, and one might even crudely present the argument syllogistically: God is material nature; material nature is singular things; responsibility to God is therefore responsibility to

singular things. If that is the case, then the ascetic dimension is not a reversion to Cartesianism, but a caution against joy's tendency to forget that its supposed purity is falsified precisely by its traversal of and immanence to the social level, that is, because the singular inevitably carries the baggage of its own materiality. In this way, *Empire's* inheritance of a rigid dichotomization of Spinoza's joy into expressive and ascetic aspects risks occluding consideration of a non-transcendental understanding of the ethical.

I will return to this point in more detail, as the tension between the text's affirmation of expressive joy and the tendency of that joy to occlude its own material basis is a consequence of the effort to avoid an ascetic interpretation of joy. In place of the ascetic and ontological tension that Negri finds in Spinoza, then, *Empire* puts into play a tension between what one might (paradoxically) call the ontological and the material, or, perhaps better, the epistemological and the ontological. For now, I wish to note that it is also on this point that Hardt and Negri part company with Deleuze. A moment in an interview of Deleuze by Negri is instructive. In this interview, Negri asks about a "tragic note" he detects in *Thousand Plateaus*. Deleuze responds with a gesture to Primo Levi and a "shame at being human," of being tainted with what people have done. "This," he adds, "is one of the most powerful incentives toward philosophy, and it's what makes all philosophy political What's so shameful is that we've no sure way of maintaining becomings, or still more of arousing them, even within ourselves."¹⁵

7 (2002), 51-70.

¹⁵"Control and Becoming," in Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia UP, 1995), 171-3. Fitzpatrick sharply critiques *Empire's* "exaltation of the 'American revolutionary experience'" as the "invention of constituent power explicitly – a power democratic and revolutionary, expansively open" (48) for its simultaneous tendency to forget that this openness was a fiction created by, *inter alia*, the juridically forced invisibility of Native Americans. Perhaps, again, a Spinozist genealogy; Warren Montag traces tensions and inconsistencies in Spinoza's embrace of the multitude through the image of a Brazilian who haunted an early dream of Spinoza's: "who is this Brazilian, if not a condensation of all those to

To put matters more schematically, *Empire* posits that the social transition from formal to real subsumption means that capital itself has moved past second-order knowledge. An adequate critique must therefore respond to these material conditions by also moving past the reliance on universals. One prefiguration of adequate critique is thus found in elements of Spinoza's affirmation of *scientia intuitiva*. The difficulties in *Empire* on this point thus echo difficulties in this moment of transition in Spinoza. One might suggest: *Empire* rewrites the *Ethics*, beginning with the formula: *capital sive natura*. The genealogy of this effort at revision dates to Marx, who kept extensive notes on the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, speaks of two legacies of *Spinoza*, and complains in his dissertation notebooks of the "enthusiasm of Spinoza, when he speaks of the consideration *sub specie aeterni*, of the love of God, or of the *libertas mentis humanae*."¹⁶ In a letter of 1843, Marx writes of the task of critique as bringing about the "self-understanding ... of the time about its struggles and wishes. This is a labor for the world and for us. It can only be the work of unified powers."¹⁷ *Empire* is the direct heir of this problematic, in all of its complexity.

3.

whom Spinoza would legally deny a voice in the absolute democracy" (*Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and his Contemporaries* (London: Verso, 1999), 87; referring to Letter 17)? Montag concludes his commentary: "why does he so frighten Spinoza? Perhaps because, like a mute shade before the door to the underworld, he beacons him to begin the journey in search of that other that Spinoza's philosophy must become in order to be itself" (123). Cf. also Ellen Meiksins Wood, "A Manifesto for Global Capitalism?" in *Debating Empire*, 61-82: 76-9, pointing out that U.S. democracy was designed to *disempower* the multitude. In the next section, I develop a critique of *Empire*'s appropriation of Spinoza along the lines suggested by these remarks.

¹⁶ "Die Begistrung Spinozas, wenn er von der Betrachtung sub specie aeterni, von der Liebe Gottes, oder der libertas mentis humanae spricht" (*Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA)² IV/1, 104). For discussion and further references, see my "Marx's Anomalous Reading."

¹⁷ "Selbstverständigung (kritische Philosophie) der Zeit über ihre Kämpfe und Wünsche. Dies ist eine Arbeit für die Welt und für uns. Sie kann nur das Werk vereinter Kräfte sein" (MEGA² I/2, 489). The passage famously concludes: "in order for mankind to have its sins forgiven, it needs only needs to explain what they are [Um sich ihre Sünden vergeben zu lassen, braucht die Menschheit sie nur für das zu erklären, was sie sind]" (*ibid.*).

Above all, then, *Empire* poses a question for method: is critique possible in a historical period of the real subsumption of society by capital, a period when every critique is always already at risk of itself being recoded as the expression of capital? Such a critique would itself have to be immanent, relying on no transcendental signifier, thereby materially coded in a way that resisted such subsumption. The broad outlines of the move might be put as follows: critique is to be transformed from a question of epistemology to a question of ontology, which is to say that critique is no longer to recognize, *at any level*, a separation of theory and praxis.¹⁸ A careful reading of *Empire* thus discloses that it is more than an analysis. It is necessarily a performance of its own argument. That is, *Empire* enacts the thought that “the control over linguistic sense and meaning and the networks of communication becomes an ever more central issue for political struggle” (404).

The performative element lies precisely in the book’s frequently derided “eclecticism,” the presence in the text of numerous diverse and even apparently oppositional narratives, yoked together as part of the same theoretical constellation. Hence, Timothy Brennan complains that, “even if one wanted to defend an argument-by-amalgam for its power to create novel constellations, one would have to recognize the distinct risk of devising a *false* assemblage. But Hardt and Negri appear not to have considered this possibility.”¹⁹ He continues that, “the problem with assemblage is, at base, epistemological. How does one borrow ideas without assuming their contextual resonances as first formulated in a system”

¹⁸ Cf. *Empire*’s reading of Habermas as relying on a no longer existent “standpoint of life and truth that could oppose the informational colonization of being” (34), and Hardt and Negri’s earlier discussion of the limitations of Rawls (*Labor of Dionysus*, 217-262).

¹⁹ “The Empire’s New Clothes,” *Critical Inquiry* 29 (2003), 337-367: 360. A version of Brennan’s paper also appears as “The Italian Ideology,” in *Debating Empire*, 97-120 (the line quoted above is at 113). *Debating Empire* oddly and unfortunately omits Hardt and Negri’s response, “The Rod of the Forest Warden,” and Brennan’s further rejoinder, “The Magician’s Wand: A Rejoinder to Hardt and Negri,” *Critical Inquiry* 29 (2003), 374-378.

(“Empire’s,” 359/“Italian,” 112)? Without wishing to minimize the danger of *Empire*’s procedure, this complaint seems precisely to miss the point. On *Empire*’s terms, the epistemological register is no longer the correct one for analysis of critique, because the epistemological register functions according to a system of representational logic; such systems require an organizing transcendental signifier. But to require an organizing transcendental signifier is to *ipso facto* fail to respond to the current historical juncture of immanence. To call the assemblage “false,” then, is already to play into capital’s hands. The eclectic set of theories merged in *Empire* should indeed be read as a constellation, as a “new mythology of reason.” The question is not one of truth or falsity, but of productive reappropriation. Hardt confirms in an interview that “what is really at stake is the formation of a new canon, a new constellation of political and philosophical traditions” (“Sovereignty, 169). The better critical questions to ask are ontological, and concern the means of production of the constellation itself.²⁰

Two initial points. First, the co-presence of all these narratives in the book demonstrates that they all have *something* to say against empire: *non opposita sed diversa*, as Negri says of Spinoza, reappropriating a motif from Biblical exegesis.²¹ Second, the assemblage of quotation can be situated as the extension of a practice with which Althusser originally credited Marx. Althusser notes that “when we read Marx, we immediately find a *reader who reads* to us, and out loud.”²² In this sense, *Empire* extends Althusser’s imperative: “we must completely reorganize the idea we have of knowledge, we must abandon the mirror

²⁰ The distinction I am making between epistemological and ontological critique can perhaps be illuminated by reference to the distinction between Feuerbach and Marx’s critique of religion. For Feuerbach, religion is simply false consciousness. For Marx, religion is the true consciousness of a false world.

²¹ *Savage Anomaly*, 127. For the motif in Biblical exegesis, see Henri De Lubac, “A propos de la formule: *diversi, sed non adversi*,” *Recherches de science religieuse* 40 (1952), 27-40.

myths of immediate vision and reading, and conceive knowledge as a production” (*op. cit.*, 24). All of these elements come together in a passage whose echoes of Althusser are striking and which should be quoted *in extenso*:

All the elements of corruption and exploitation are imposed on us by the linguistic and communicative regimes of production: destroying them in words is as urgent as doing so in deeds. This is not really a matter of ideology critique if by ideology we still understand a realm of ideas and language that is superstructural, external to production How can sense and meaning be oriented differently or organized in alternative, coherent communicative apparatuses? Knowledge has to become linguistic action and philosophy has to become a real *appropriation of knowledge*. In other words, knowledge and communication have to constitute life through struggle (*Empire* 404, emphasis in original).

In sum: “revolutionary political militancy today must rediscover what has always been its proper form: *not representational but constituent activity*” (413, emph. in original). If capital is that which fragments and disperses community (this is its “fundamental apparatus of imperial control” (400)), *Empire* invokes the intellectual labor of others in community against it. In this sense, the text should also be read as an intervention in contemporary academic discourse and the institution of the academy as one of the fundamental avenues of capitalist legitimation. All of those whose voices empire represses (*e.g.*, Machiavelli, Spinoza, Marx, Deleuze), and all of those it distorts into conformism (*e.g.*, Heidegger, Wittgenstein), are brought together to stand up and speak against it. This is the intellectual labor of *Empire*.

Still, the turn to Spinoza illustrates one of the most difficult tensions of *Empire*. To the extent that the multitude simply is the diverse set of oppositional voices brought into constellation by the text, the method is constitutive and, as Deleuze says of Spinoza,

²² *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1970), 18.

expressive. Negri earlier credits Spinoza with opening such a constitutive possibility: “production as a constitutive ontology. Spinoza founds this possibility of philosophy, or rather of the destruction of philosophy, with absolute coherence” (*Savage*, 224). The enabling condition of this possibility is the shift in register from transcendence to immanence. Hence, he continues that “constitutive ontology recognizes production within the structure of being. It is not possible to say being, except in terms of production. The critique of being is the critique of production” (*ibid.*).

On the other hand, to the extent that *Empire* expresses optimism that the multitude will constitute a new revolutionary locus, the problem is again posed epistemologically, and expression reverts to imitation of common notions. In this vein, *Empire* calls for a new “materialist teleology ... an apparatus for bringing together the subject (the multitude) and the object (cosmopolitical liberation) within postmodernity” (64). The multitude as new revolutionary locus recalls Lukács, and it is the sort of construct against which Spinoza seems to warn. In an appendix to the first part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza considers the reasons why people do not understand that “all things were predetermined by God [=nature], certainly not by free will or absolute pleasure, but by the absolute nature, that is, infinite power, of God [*sed ex absolutâ Dei naturâ, sive infinitâ potentiâ*]” (E1Appx). Here we can mark the emergence of the critical tension that Negri tracks, in *Savage Anomaly*, between “*potentia*” (productive power) on the one hand, and “*potestas*” (represented, juridical power) on the other. Here one may also begin a reflection on *Empire*’s own tension between ontological and epistemological figurations of the multitude. Spinoza describes the prejudice which turns reflection on the *potentia absoluta Dei* into reflection on the *potestas* of God the lawgiver as follows:

Everything which I intend to indicate here [*quae hîc indicare suspicio*] depends on this one prejudice, that people commonly suppose that all natural things are like themselves and act toward an end; for they say that God has made everything for man's sake and has made man so that he should worship God (E1Appx).

Two glosses on this passage are necessary in the present context. First, although Spinoza will denounce the prejudice, the odd complexity of the reference to it suggests that the denunciation (which subsequently begins by accounting genetically for the prejudice's emergence) will not be a simple accusation of false consciousness. This is a prejudice which is perhaps even necessary, if not to retain, at least to work through. Second, the identification of "one prejudice" presents an epistemological common notion, as the immediate slippage into its variations – teleology in nature, God the provider, God the lawgiver – suggests. To combat this prejudice, it will thus always be necessary (a) to recognize its power, by working through it, rather than by taking the short cut of epistemological critique; and (b) to descend to the level of particulars: denunciation of the formalization of these particulars as the concept of a certain prejudice denounces a formalized concept into which the prejudices themselves can never fit without leaving a remainder.²³ That is, to denounce the concept of the prejudice without further denunciation of its singular instantiations is to enact the prejudice itself by supposing a formal unity to inhere in the diversity of individual prejudices. Conversely, to produce the concept of the multitude as something more than its singular instantiations is to enact the epistemological prejudice against which the concept simultaneously works.

Empire is productive insofar as it does not resolve this tension. Capital, as Hardt and Negri explain more than once, must be worked through and not simply discarded. So too, the

realization of the movement from formal to real subsumption produces both the necessity of the construct of capital (as a form of *potestas*) and the complete diffusion of that concept into the socius (which constitutes the transition from conceiving capital as *potestas* to capital as *potentia*). From this standpoint, the eclecticism of *Empire* carries out an aspect of the critique which is both irreducible and essential. Not only must capital exceed its concept, so must the multitude. Hence the multitude is presented as beyond measure (and thus beyond the conceptual order of subjectivity), even as the common notion of “multitude” is the necessary condition for the book’s own unity as a text.

Empire closes with a reference to the Franciscans in which all of the preceding tensions are manifest. I want to close with consideration of this passage, and will deliberately not attempt to resolve the tensions within it, as it will be more productive to remain within them and resist over-hasty efforts at closure. Hardt and Negri write:

There is an ancient legend that might serve to illuminate the future life of communist militancy: that of Saint Francis of Assisi. Consider his work. To denounce the poverty of the multitude he adopted that common condition and discovered there the ontological power of a new society. The communist militant does the same, identifying in the common condition of the multitude its enormous wealth. Francis in opposition to nascent capitalism refused every instrumental discipline, and in opposition to the mortification of the flesh (in poverty and in the constituted order) he posed a joyous life, including all of being and nature, the animals, sister moon, brother sun, the birds of the field, the poor and exploited humans, together against the will of power and corruption. Once again in postmodernity we find ourselves in Francis’s situation, posing against the misery of power the joy of being. This is a revolution that no power will control – because biopower and communism, cooperation and revolution remain together, in love, simplicity, and also

²³ My allusion is to Adorno: “the name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into concepts without leaving a remainder” (*Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 5).

innocence. This is the irrepressibly lightness and joy of being communist (413).²⁴

The passage vacillates between ontological and epistemological tropes. First, we are told of an “ancient legend.” That *Empire* closes with reference to a legend returns to the textual strategy of overcoming the common prejudice of a rigid separation between narrative and conceptual/theoretical discourse. Producing this legend is thereby an aspect of establishing a “material mythology of reason” (396). Then the paragraph retreats: we are told that Francis opposed “nascent capitalism,” which seems to revert to one of the less successful common notions of orthodox, teleological Marxism. Finally, we are referred to the “irrepressible lightness and joy of being,” which both recalls Kundera’s *Unbearable Lightness of Being* and silently interprets the “unbearable” lightness as “irrepressible.”

This is indeed *Empire*’s appropriative right, and the passage resonates well, for example, with one Kundera character’s insistence on the problems with transcendental signifiers as a basis of political action: “behind all occupations and invasions lurks a more basic, pervasive evil, and that the image of that evil was a parade of people marching by with raised fists and shouting identical syllables in unison.”²⁵ But Kundera also, inevitably, exceeds his reappropriation. More precisely, joy again has two aspects, one of which is occluded in the reappropriation. Two passages in Kundera’s *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* will illustrate. In one, the narrative voice recalls seeing an image of people dancing in a ring immediately before a clash with police. “They are not united by a *march*, like soldiers or fascist commandos; they are united by a *dance*, like children. And they can’t wait to spit their

²⁴ My initial reflections on this passage were occasioned by discussion with Alan Schrift following my presentation of an earlier version of the paper.

²⁵ *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 100.

innocence in the cops' faces."²⁶ Almost immediately thereafter, the same voice suggests that innocent joy can come at the cost of a certain violence. The narrative invokes an image of the communist surrealist poet Éluard's innocent dance with a girl in Prague, part of a ring of dancers "the very image of a giant wreath taking flight." Below in the city was "Prague with its cafés full of poets and its jails full of traitors, and in the crematorium they were just finishing off one Socialist representative and one surrealist" (68). Éluard's innocence is as studied as it is irrepressible: he had earlier refused to intervene and attempt to save the condemned surrealist from execution.

Finally, *Empire*'s closing gesture to the Franciscans is productive on another register, as it also recalls an interruption in the textual practice of academic philosophy. On May 26, 1328, the Franciscan William of Ockham, already under a long and inconclusive investigation for heresy, fled Avignon, eventually arriving in Munich, where he worked for the rest of his life under the protection of Ludwig of Bavaria. In Avignon and before, Ockham had written entirely within the usual scholastic tradition of logic, metaphysics and theology. After, his writings were entirely political.²⁷ Part of Ockham's theoretical political discourse is undoubtedly generated by need: one outcome of his theory is that academics have the right to discuss the papacy.²⁸ In the process, he also begins to understand the Church constitutively, rather than transcendently. Indeed, one of the lineages that *Empire* constructs specifically

²⁶ *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Penguin, 1980), 63.

²⁷ For Ockham's biography, see William J. Courtenay, "The Academic and Intellectual Worlds of Ockham," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, ed. Paul Vincent Spade (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 17-30. For more on the proceedings that led Ockham to France in the first place, see also Francis E. Kelley, "Ockham: Avignon, Before and After," in *From Ockham to Wyclif*, ed. Anne Husdon and Michael Wilks (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 1-18. For the political writings, see John Kilkullen, "The Political Writings," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, 302-325 ; and Arthur Stephen McGrade, *The Political Thought of William of Ockham: Personal and Institutional Principles* (Cambridge: CUP 1974) and Richard Scholz, Richard, "Wilhelm von Ockham als politischer Denker," in *William of Ockham als politischer Denker und sein Breviloquium de principatu tyrannico* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1944), 1-38.

traces the term “multitude” to Ockham’s definition of the Church as the multitude of the faithful [*multitudo fidelium*], “meaning that it is not superior and distinct from the community of Christians but immanent to that community.”²⁹ Similarly, in the *Contra Ionnem*, he refers to “this church, which brings together the apostles, evangelists, all the Roman pontiffs and the other episcopals and prelates, the martyrs and doctors, and all catholic people up to the present time”³⁰ As such an aggregation, the Church as concept resists reification into the transcendental subject of the Papal advocates of its *plenitudo potestatis*. Ockham’s more specific target, Pope John XXII, is being charged with heresy for denying the beatific vision – thought to be the greatest joy attainable by the human intellect – until after the resurrection. Ockham defends the (more traditional) view that this joy was available to souls immediately upon death.

Empire’s oblique gesture to the Franciscans, then, suggests the need not just to rethink the multitude along ontological lines, but the importance of theoretical discourse in speaking out against putatively universal structures of power which declare that joy must be infinitely deferred. How this is to be undertaken is a problem that *Empire* presents in all its productive complexity, no matter what one thinks of the solution provided. Spinoza closes his *Ethics* by recalling that “if salvation were ready to hand and could be discovered without great toil, how could it be that it is almost universally neglected? All things excellent are as difficult as they

²⁸ See *Breviloquium* I.2.

²⁹ *Empire*, 73, citing *Breviloquium* III.16. Ockham’s chapter concludes his discussion of temporal jurisdiction outside of the Church; his argument is that the papacy could not have universal temporal jurisdiction outside the Church, since evidence points to divinely ordained temporal power both before and during the early Church. *Breviloquium* III.14 similarly affirms the “laws of peoples” (common law), in addition to the “laws of emperors and kings.”

³⁰ “Haec enim ecclesia, quae Apostolos, Evangelistas, omnes Romanos pontifices ceterosque episcopos ac prelatos, martyresque et doctores, omnesque catholicos populos usque ad haec tempora comprehendit,” *Contra Ionnem*, in *Opera Politica*, ed. H. S. Offler (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1956), III, 66.10-13.

are rare” (E5P42Sch). In this space I will end simply by invoking another voice. In concluding his own *Minima Moralia*, Adorno remarks:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite. But it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair’s breadth, from the scope of existence Beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.”³¹

³¹ *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London : Verso, 1978), 247.