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Extricating Politics From a Certain Ontology

*A Critical Reading of Multitude*¹

- Bradley J. Macdonald -

The political and social theory of Antonio Negri is now getting full attention in the mainstream media, activist circles, and academic contexts.² With the publication of *Empire* in 2000 (written with Michael Hardt), all of a sudden this venerable radical political theorist has been getting a hearing, in the process being hailed by many as *the* thinker of the 21st century. With the appearance of the sequel to this work, *Multitude*, we can only expect more avid discussions concerning this important thinker's work.³ Of course, as many radicals and political theorists know, Negri has been around for a long time as both an important political activist (associated with *operiasmo* and *autonomia* in the 1960s and 1970s in Italy), and an interesting, indeed heterodox, Marxist thinker. Moreover, I would argue, as others have, that to truly understand Negri's current work one must fully understand his political background and his earlier engagement with Marx's work.⁴

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² Leaving aside the mainstream news media, the importance of Negri's thought to activist circles is clearly indicated by Hardt and Negri's "Forward" to the publication of the papers and talks from the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2002. See *Another World is Possible: Popular Alternatives to Globalization in the World Social Forum*, W. Fischer and T. Ponniah, eds. (London: Zed Books, 2003), pp. xvi-xix. In terms of academic circles, Negri's interest can be seen in the following: the publication of a double issue of *Rethinking Marxism* (Volume 13, Number 3/4, Fall/Winter 2001) devoted to *Empire; Debating Empire*, G. Balakrishnan, ed. (London: Verso, 2003); a special issue of *Strategies*, Volume 16, Number 2, November 2003, entitled, "Antonio Negri: From Autonomia to Empire"; and, *Empire's New Clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri*, P. Passavant and J. Dean, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2004).

³ *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004).

⁴ This point is made by Alex Callinicos, "Toni Negri in Perspective," in *Debating Empire*, pp. 121-143, and Sylvère Lotringer, "We, the Multitude," Forward to Paulo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), pp. 7-19. See also Macdonald, "Thinking Through Marx: An Introduction to the Political Theory of Antonio Negri," in *Strategies*, Volume 16, No. 2, November 2003, pp. 85-95. For an introduction to the political discourses

With all of these current accolades, there is one that will concern me today: namely, that Hardt and Negri's arguments in *Empire* (and now *Multitude*) have provided an incredible rethinking of the state of globalization, and have, in turn, provided the most important theory for anti-globalism movements.⁵ In this respect, what is implied is that Hardt and Negri have articulated an important characterization of the potentials and character of the current globalist radical movement that both famously exploded in the streets of Seattle in 1999 and engaged in dialogue and discussion in the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2002. Crucially, their importance is supposedly indicated in both their characterization of *Empire* and in the crucial category of "the multitude." The latter attempts to "name" the political subject of resistance and revolt against *Empire*, and an analysis of this figure will provide an important way of uncovering the relevance and significance of their analysis of the politics of globalist radical movements. For this reason, I will look specifically at the concept of the "multitude," particularly as it is articulated in their new work, *Multitude*. Importantly, in their new work Hardt and Negri clarify the connection of the multitude to democracy (in its abstract *and* practical dimensions).

Drawing inspiration from an interesting critique by Ernesto Laclau on the ontological assumptions of *Empire*,⁶ I argue that Hardt and Negri's attempt flounders in that it cannot take into consideration the necessity for a *politics toward democracy*. This failure is related to Hardt and Negri's attachment to a certain Spinozist ontology which, irrespective of its assumed imbrication with the political, does not allow for a rendering of the political logic involved in the building of a globalist radical movement. What is interesting is that Negri's earlier work on Marx actually intimates a more interesting

within which Negri's ideas initially germinated, see Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

⁵ See, for example, Callinicos, "Toni Negri in Perspective," pp. 121-2, and Callinicos, *An Anti-Capitalist Manifesto* (London: Polity Press, 2003), p. 54, for example. I think this characterization is confirmed in the fact that Negri was asked to write the forward to the papers and discussions that occurred at the World Social Forum. See *Another World is Possible*, pp. xvi-xix. I will use the term "anti-globalism" as opposed to "anti-globalization" to characterize these movements, for they are not against globalization per se, but against neo-liberal regimes of globalization. See Manfred Steger, *Globalism: The New Market Ideology* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002).

⁶ Ernesto Laclau, "Can Immanence Explain Social Struggles?," in *Empire's New Clothes*, pp. 21-30.

“ontological” conception that is closer to what is necessary in this respect. I will thus first revisit Negri’s early work to uncover this conception, and then look at the problems I see in his latest work with Hardt. In the final section, I turn primarily to the early work of Laclau and Mouffe to elaborate why I think their post-Marxist position provides a more potent tool for conceptualizing and characterizing the nature of globalist radicalism today.

Negri Reading Marx: Antagonism, Struggle, and Capitalism

[I] believe that the subjective point of view is basically constitutive and that this constitutive process can be interpreted in ontological terms according to an hermeneutic of real determinations. By this I mean that points of view are counterposed in real terms, that the conflict between subjects is something tangible, and that points of view and points of conflict give shape to contexts and frameworks having material importance. Consequently, . . . , the ontological aspects of subjectivity are established (or rather, produced) through the formulation of points of view, the interlacement of orientations of struggle and the revelation of intentions and desires.

—Antonio Negri.⁷

Before we actually look at *Multitude*, I want to articulate briefly Negri’s earlier engagement with Marx’s writings. In Negri’s work on Marx (particularly his work from the s1960s and 1970s), we can uncover an interesting characterization of social life that I think gets submerged in his later work. This different ontological terrain is represented in the concept of “antagonism” which is considered to be fundamental to the development of capitalism and provides the important impetus toward transformation; indeed it becomes central to a politics of liberation as Negri conceives of it. Of course, this

⁷ Negri, “The Antagonistic Production of Subjectivity,” in *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twentieth-First Century*, J. Newell, trans. (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1989), p. 128.

concept was a staple of Italian workerist and autonomist theory, and is not unique to Negri's thought.⁸ In the context of these political discourses, "antagonism" represents both a contingent process of struggle and contestation and the development of a particular political subjectivity associated with specific political tactics and strategies. Thus, for Negri and other Italian Marxists, the central category for intellectual analysis was "class composition," a practice that characterized the aleatory and changing political character of the working classes in their struggles against capital. While recognizing Negri's eventual movement away from classical workerism,⁹ I think the above quotation shows the extent to which Negri continued to attach himself to this early notion of "antagonism": Negri sees the capitalist world in its "real determinations," where "points of view are counterposed in real terms" and such a conflictual counterposition "give shape to contexts and frameworks having material importance." Moreover, the possibility of political "subjectivity" (that is, a political subject for liberation and emancipation) is "produced" through the discursive "formulation of points of view, the interlacement of orientations of struggle and the revelation of intentions and desires." In this context, then, Negri is seemingly articulating an "ontological" view that is based upon the irreducible separation and specificity of political demands, and on the structuring context of conflict and contestation in engendering political subjectivity. This is one of Negri's earlier statements concerning a move to "ontology" in his work. Yet, and this is important, it is an "ontology" that has different characteristics than that which will appear later in his work, most famously in *Empire* and *Multitude*.¹⁰ In his work influenced by Marx and by the rise of working class subjectivities he encountered in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s, there is less an assumption of the fullness of desire and affirmation (that arises in his reading of Spinoza), and more an assumption of how contestation and struggle engender desire and affirmation in the constitution of political

⁸ See, Wright, *Storming Heaven*, p. 138, for instance.

⁹ See Wright, *Storming Heaven*, pp. 152-175, where the author clarifies how Negri moved away from his early attachment to classic workerism, primarily through the development of the concept of the "social worker."

¹⁰ For a perceptive overview of Negri's ontological assumptions, see Timothy Murphy, "The Ontological Turn in the Marxism of Georg Lukács and Antonio Negri," in *Strategies*, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 163-184. The main problem I have with Murphy's rendering of Negri's ontology is that it assumes a continuity in ontological assumptions that I think are not there. Unfortunately, most commentators take Negri's later espousal of a Spinozist position, clearly beginning with *Savage Anomaly*, as the key to reading his earlier thought.

subjectivity. In this way, I would argue that if there is an ontological position in his early work, it is not Spinozist but “genealogical.”¹¹

Thus, based on lectures Negri gave at the École Normale Supérieure in 1978 (by invitation of Louis Althusser), *Marx Beyond Marx* attempts to uncover a Marx that is fundamentally open to the revolutionary moment of class struggle, who saw conflict and the struggle for power as central to his understanding of the development of capitalism.¹² In the enigmatic notebooks of the *Grundrisse*, Negri notes, Marx presented a conceptualization of capitalism based on the irreducible antagonism between the working classes and capitalist class. As Negri clarifies:

When we reread the *Grundrisse*, one feeling dominates: that here we are truly “beyond Marx,” but also beyond all possible methodologies of pluralism or of transversality. The field of research is determined by the continual tension between the plurality of real instances and the explosive duality of antagonism. What gives unity to this systemic (or anti-systemic) framework is antagonism, not as the basis of this totality but as the source of ever more powerful and plural expansion of this same antagonism. In methodology, the class struggle is even more antagonistic and destructive in so far as it melds with the liberty of the subjects. Marx beyond Marx? The *Grundrisse* beyond *Capital*? Maybe.¹³

¹¹ In using “genealogical” in this context, I am of course referring to the work of Michel Foucault, particularly his characterization of “genealogy” in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, Volume 2 of *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, J. Faubion, ed. (New York: The New Press, 1998), pp. 369-391. In saying this, I am not making a claim that Negri’s early works were directly influenced by Foucault, but that they bear interesting parallels to Foucault’s characterization of the force field of struggle and conflict that give rise to moral valuations and truth regimes. For a reading of a “genealogical Marx” in Foucault’s work, a rendering that has interesting parallels to Negri’s Marxism, see Macdonald, “Marx, Foucault, Genealogy,” in *Polity*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 3, Spring 2002, pp. 259-284. Interestingly, Callinicos also sees this Foucauldian perspective in Negri’s work on Marx, but, given his antipathy toward Foucault and postmodern theory in general, he uses it as a way to denigrate Negri’s position. See “Toni Negri in Perspective,” pp. 127-133.

¹² Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, H. Cleaver, M. Ryan, and M. Viano, trans. (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1991).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Of course, what Negri is referring to in his claim that these notebooks point “beyond Marx” is that they point to a different Marx than usually codified and transmitted in the Marxist tradition. Negri’s Marx is one whose very categories were expressions of “revolutionary will,”¹⁴ not the expressions of a detached social scientist; one who assumed the autonomy of working class subjectivities, not their inevitable determination within the confines of objectivist economic laws; and, one whose basic methodological assumption is all relations contain “the possibility of scission,”¹⁵ not that all relations are interwoven in a overdetermining totality of either the structuralist or Hegelian type.

Drawing from Marx’s *Grundrisse*, then, Negri argues that capitalism is irreducibly antagonistic, and thus its developments are a product of the continual contestation of collective wills between labor and capital. Literally, for Negri, capitalist history is the “history of class *struggle*” (my emphasis), to draw upon Marx and Engel’s prophetic words in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848). In so being, capitalism has neither a necessary teleology nor an *a priori* objective structure; its developmental pathway is intimately contingent, and thus “[e]very result is appreciable only *a posteriori*; nothing is preconceived.”¹⁶ Continually, the motor force of capitalist history is the embodiment of living labor in the working class (as Negri notes, following other Italian Marxists, “capitalist innovation is always a product, a compromise or a response, in short a constraint which derives from workers’ antagonism”¹⁷), to such an extent that now—under advanced conditions of capitalism, in which, as Marx had already intimated, there is truly a “real subsumption” of society by capital—its existence is autonomously constitutive, and is thus already the embodiment of communism. This “desire” for communism—a “desire” that is expressed in the reality of social and economic developments under advanced capitalism—is neither an unfolding of some preconstituted teleology within capitalism nor is it the expression of some substantialist character of being human; rather, in Negri’s early work on Marx at least, it is a fundamental

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁶ Negri, “Twenty Theses on Marx: Interpretation of the Class Situation Today,” in *Marxism Beyond Marxism*, S. Makdisi, C. Casarino, and R. Karl, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 158.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

expression of the force-field of antagonisms that continue to expand and unfold given the contingent developments of class struggle.

Now, such a conception has interesting implications on how we conceive of politics that we should briefly consider, for, in a significant way, they will parallel what we will later argue is a necessary understanding of political struggle and action. If we define the context of capitalist development in terms of a distance and scission between political subjects and capitalist power, we enter a social terrain of fundamental undecidability concerning political demands, action, and ultimately, subjectivity. That is, there is no social essence or material necessity for the development of particular political subjectivities. The latter are constructed via the particular practices in which actors discursively and materially construct “regimes” of political action that are both independent of, and in response to, the dictates and practices of the capitalist class. This is what allows one to avoid what Negri rightly notes are the problems with traditional conceptions of Marxism that assumed the teleological necessity of working class radicalism based upon the naturalist unfolding of the capitalist mode of production. Rather, the fundamental condition of “antagonism,” as defined in Negri’s work on Marx, demands a continual process of articulating connections between political subjects and in struggling and contesting capitalist counter-regimes developed in response to these tentative articulations. What antagonism as a founding social logic thus ensures is there is never an automatic constitution of a particular political subject, but always precarious and oscillating practices of political subjectivities struggling against capital. Such a conception, then, provides for a clear and irresolute conception of the political stakes involved in attempting to bring about important values and goals such as democracy. That is, it allows for a *politics toward democracy*, if we mean by “politics toward” the contingent construction of discourses and practices that bring about democratic practices.

From Marx to Spinoza: The Wide World of the Multitude

The ontological fabric of Empire is constructed by the activity beyond measure of the multitude and its virtual powers. These virtual, constituent

powers conflict endlessly with the constituted power of Empire. They are completely positive since their “being-against” is a “being-for,” in other words, a resistance that becomes love and community. We are situated precisely at the hinge of infinite finitude that links together the virtual and the possible, engaged in the passage from desire to a coming future.

—Hardt and Negri.¹⁸

With the publication of *Empire* in 2000, Hardt and Negri attempt to both further develop very important concepts and theoretical relays engendered in Negri’s analysis of Marx’s work and rethink the nature of what has been called “globalization.” *Empire* sprawls as a vast network of concepts and ideas (much like the rhizomatic structure of power that Hardt and Negri argue exists under Empire itself), exhibiting a theoretical *dispositif* that attempts to both uncover the developments associated with power in our global capitalist life-world and clarify the lines of flight already existing in this increasingly deterritorialized social matrix, modes of subjectivity (under the name of “the multitude”) that are gestating new possibilities. In a sense, Hardt and Negri are now performing Negri’s earlier ideas on the world stage. While the earlier notions of “proletariat,” “living labor,” “immaterial labor,” and “factory-society” remain key notions within this new conceptual assemblage, and the basic idea of the reversal of constitutive power that was developed within Negri’s early writings on Marx (which he derived from Italian workerist and autonomist positions) is still the key political position, they are now integrated with other concepts and notions. While dismissive of much of postmodern theory,¹⁹ Hardt and Negri clearly draw upon key notions from both Foucault’s and Deleuze and Guattari’s work to help in conceptualizing the apparatus of Empire. In particular, they argue that Empire is engaged in the continual articulation of the “biopolitical dimension” of human life (from Foucault’s later work), and its power is

¹⁸ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 361.

¹⁹ See their discussion of postmodern and postcolonial theory as reiterations of the logic of power under Empire in *Empire*, pp. 137-156. For a critique of their position, see Michael Ryan, “The Empire of Wealth,” in *Politics and Culture*, # 1, 2001, and “The Empire of Wealth II—Differential Economics,” in *Politics and Culture*, # 3, 2001, both at <http://laurel.comncoll.edu/politicsandculture>. I find Ryan’s critique to be interesting to the extent that he has been a continual champion of Negri’s theory (having incorporated his position in his classic work on Marx and deconstruction, and having translated and introduced his writings).

reminiscent of Deleuze's "society of control." Both of these concepts are indicative of the movement of power from more centralized domains associated with the state or capital, into more imminent, dispersed, and "productive" forms of power.²⁰

In this narrative, Hardt and Negri articulate the mutually constitutive political and economic regimes associated with Empire. On one level, the notion of sovereignty has transmuted from a clearly centralized practice associated with nation-states into a vast, interrelated, and expansive network of power relations and political nodal points (everything now occurs *within* Empire; there is no *outside*). For Hardt and Negri, the contemporary context of Empire is one in which there are three interrelated layers of power: first, the military supremacy of the United States; second, the control of the biopolitical realm in the multinational corporations; and, third, the vast networks of NGOs and international regimes that represent the bulwark of humanitarian and service actors in the international realm. Economically, of course, the spread of capitalism within increasingly diverse realms of the global everyday life is being dictated by corporations, and this biopolitical management is at once a tightening noose of exploitation and oppression, but also, as befits Negri's heterodox Marxist position, opening up potentialities for transformation and liberation. For, tied to this development (which we might term, following his earlier idea, the rise of the "factory-world") is the coextensive power and subjectivity of working class subjects or, more globally, "the multitude." Again, the basic idea here is very similar to Negri's earlier conceptualizations of the contemporary working class. The biopolitical dimension is immanently driven by transmutations within the "multitude," to such an extent that they are its basic driving force. With the world becoming more "glocal" (that is, more interpenetrated by global forces in economics and culture, yet always articulated via the unique characteristics of the locality in question), the multitude is becoming more flexible, immaterial, expansive, singular, and intensive.

²⁰ See Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, pp. 22-41.

What is definitely clear, though, is a gradual transmutation in characterizing the constitution of the political subject that stands against world-wide capitalism. In particular, Hardt and Negri have clearly moved away from Negri's earlier genealogical characterization of the constitution of the political subject, in which there is an emphasis on the importance of struggle and contestation—what he called earlier the structuring characteristic of “antagonism”—to an affirmative ontological characterization of the necessity of contestation and revolt. As we noted previously, in Negri's work on Marx the characterization of working class subjectivity is one built upon the lack or distance between its mode of constitution and interests and those of the capitalist class. That is, there is a fundamental scission between the working class and the capitalist class that allows for the former to be *living* labor, and not, as some might argue, a figure of labor defined by the haunting presence of capitalist power. Yet, in *Empire*, and as we will see, *Multitude*, there is another ontological figure that haunts Negri's current conceptual discourse. This is the affirmative and positive ontology associated with Spinoza (particularly, the rendering of his philosophy associated with Gilles Deleuze²¹), in which the constitutive powers of human resistance and human creativity are already imminent to the figure of what Spinoza called the “multitude.”

Of course, this ontological dimension to Negri's conception of the multitude is really not new; it has been gestating since Negri reengaged the work of Spinoza during his imprisonment in 1979, a rethinking that culminated in his work, *The Savage Anomaly* (1981).²² Briefly put, from Spinoza Negri was able to develop an ontological perspective that allowed an understanding of a political figure—“the multitude”—whose existence was premised upon the unfolding of diverse “singularities” (social subjects whose differences remain “different”²³) within the “common” matrixes of human life, the latter

²¹ This influence is indicated by Negri (with Anne Dufourmantelle) in *Negri on Negri*, M. DeBevoise, trans. (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 149.

²² See *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*, M. Hardt, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). For a collection of more recent essays on Spinoza, see Negri, *Subversive Spinoza: (Un)contemporary Variations*, T. Murphy, ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004). For a discussion of Negri's notion of ontology, particularly as it compares with Lukács' conceptualization, see Murphy, “The Ontological Turn in the Marxism of Georg Lukács and Antonio Negri,” pp. 163-184. See also, Peter Fitzpatrick, “The Immanence of *Empire*,” in *Empire's New Clothes*, pp. 31-55.

²³ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. 99.

associated with increasing social reproduction, the extensive development of communication networks, and the flexible division of labor that defines post-Fordist global capitalism. Moreover, this ontological conception of the political subject provides, for Negri, a constant refrain of resistance. “The resistance of the multitude to all attempts to format life,” Negri clarifies,

consists above all, I believe, in experiencing the pleasure of singularity. Arriving at this conception was very difficult for me. I had read Spinoza. But it wasn't until I began to read Deleuze, and then to discuss his work with him and to reflect upon it more deeply, that I understood the intensity of this concept of singularity. . . [Such a conception] closely resembles musical notes, which, although they are completely singular, are capable of creating life, of combining with each other to produce. . .each particular moment of life. . . To my way of thinking it was necessary to insist. . .on the constitutive power of singularities, their power to constitute the common. For the singularity always points toward the common: the common is its product; and singularities arise from the proliferation of the common. I believe that resistance consists in just this process.²⁴

But, aside from such general philosophical discussions, in what way can we clarify this dialectic between “singularity” and “the common” that defines the ontological condition of resistance of the multitude? If we are to find an answer, we need to now turn to Hardt and Negri's most recent work, *Multitude*. For it is here, to draw upon the metaphor that Negri uses above, that we can begin to hear the music of the multitude in more clear and precise tones.

Multitude After Empire: Why Write Another Book?

Now it is a matter of posing. . .the problem of the becoming-subject of the multitude. In other words, the virtual conditions must now become real in a concrete figure.

²⁴ Negri, *Negri on Negri*, pp. 149-150.

—Hardt and Negri.²⁵

All intellectual work arises in certain political and theoretical contexts which define the terms of their exposition and the necessities of their conceptualizations. Hardt and Negri's *Multitude* is no different. If *Empire* was written during a period defined, as the authors note, between the first Gulf War and the war in Kosovo,²⁶ and during a period of relative quiet in terms of globalist radical movements (whose character was supposedly defined by their “incommunicability” with each other²⁷), *Multitude* was written between 9/11 and the current war in Iraq, and during a period that saw an incredible explosion of radical movements against the neoliberal regime of globalization and against the war in Iraq. Indeed, such a different political context is reflected in the priority they give to discussing the nature of war under Empire in the first third of their text, an emphasis that was tellingly lacking in *Empire*. In this context, Hardt and Negri argue that, given the relative decrease in the importance of the nation-state, all wars are now “civil wars” within the imperial sovereignty of Empire, a development in which the “state of exception has become permanent and general”²⁸ and security rather than defense has become the key defining strategic practice. The movement toward security is intimately related to the fact that there is no longer an “outside” to Empire, and that there is a continuous need to control and reproduce the biopolitical realm of global life. Given its military superiority, the United States plays an important, and increasingly terrifying, role in asserting and reasserting, producing and reproducing, the conditions for “security” in the world. Thus, Hardt and Negri argue that what is exhibited by the current war in Iraq is not only a reflection of capitalist interests (for oil, for instance) or a representation of neoconservative ideology or both; it is also something else. From the perspective of Empire, it portrays clearly the way in which “nation-building” is becoming “the ‘productive’ face of biopower and security.”²⁹

²⁵ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 407.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-59.

²⁸ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. 7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Moreover, the theoretical, and in turn, dialogical, terrain has transformed as well, given that *Empire* gave rise to a number of critiques from various quarters. Thus, *Multitude* is as much of a text that develops a different perspective than *Empire*,³⁰ as it is a text that is attempting to confront and answer some of the criticisms that have been leveled at its earlier textual companion. Without going into great detail on the critical reception of their first book, there are a number of concerns raised by commentators that do provide a way of gaining access to the argumentative and rhetorical character of this new sequel. First, their argument concerning the loss of importance of the nation-state in the new postmodern sovereignty associated with *Empire* gave rise to critiques that this ignores the continued importance of nation-states in installing and reproducing the necessary practices associated with, among other things, capitalist accumulation on the world stage.³¹ Throughout *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri are at pains to assert that their earlier discussion pointed to tendencies only, and that, indeed, nation-states are still key actors (it is just, as they note, nation-states—even the United States—cannot ignore the driving imperatives of *Empire*).³²

Second, the central concept of “immaterial labor” was seen as ignoring the global conditions of labor in which the industrial working class is still ultimately dominant, and in which there were incredible disparities in laboring conditions between North and South, for instance.³³ Drawing upon Marx’s discussion of historical tendencies, Hardt and Negri continually assert that they see “immaterial labor” as a *qualitatively*, not quantitatively, dominant factor, whereby even industrial and agricultural work is being transformed by its unique characteristics.³⁴ Moreover, in response to the way they seemingly lumped workers around the world in the general category of “immaterial

³⁰ In *Multitude*, p. xvii, Hardt and Negri see their two books thusly: “. . .we have first in *Empire* tried to delineate a new global form of sovereignty; and now, in this book, we try to understand the nature of the emerging global class formation, the multitude.”

³¹ See, for example, Ellen Meiksin Woods, “A Manifesto for Global Capital?,” in *Debating Empire*, pp. 61-82.

³² See, for example, Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. 163, where the authors note: “. . .nation-states remain important (some, of course, more than others), but they have nonetheless been changed radically in the global context. . . There is no contradiction between the nation-state and globalization from this perspective. States continue to perform many of their traditional functions in the interregnum but are transformed by the emerging global power they tend to increasingly serve.”

³³ See, for example, Giovanni Arrighi, “Lineages of Empire,” in *Debating Empire*, pp. 29-42.

³⁴ See, for example, Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. 141.

labor” and also “the multitude,” Hardt and Negri attempt to painstakingly flesh out the unique conditions associated with different forms of labor, and thus exploitation, under Empire.³⁵

Third, and most important for our concerns in this essay, many critics were mystified by the characterization of the figure of the “multitude,” particularly in terms of what it meant for a politics of resistance and liberation against Empire. Some saw their claim about the liberatory project of the multitude as really saying something very traditional in terms of the Marxist tradition: namely, that capitalism is digging its own grave in dialectically creating a force that will now engender a new world.³⁶ Others were struck by the vacant utopian impulse and/or “myth” that seemed to course through their entire discussion of the multitude.³⁷ If the multitude represented a rather mysterious political subject in *Empire*—characterized by seemingly diverse, incommunicative struggles (e.g., the LA uprisings of 1992 and the Zapatistas); projecting the ontological condition of the “*res gestae*, the singular virtualities that operate the connection between the possible and the real, [that] are in the first passage outside measure and in the second beyond measure”³⁸; and characterized by a politics of “exodus” and “nomadism,” all pointing toward three important demands for rights (global citizenship; guaranteed income; and appropriation of means of production)³⁹—Hardt and Negri have now found a clear reflection of their political subject in the organization and goals of anti-globalism movements. First, these movements are reflecting organizational structures that are expressive of the post-Fordist nature of economic life, in which there are no defining centers but just flexible “networks” whose combined practices seemingly exhibit a “swarm intelligence,” that is, an organization and “unity” that is imminent and common to the diverse expressions of the multitude.⁴⁰ Second, Hardt and Negri also argue that these are movements in which

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-188.

³⁶ See, for example, Slavoj Žižek, “Have Hardt and Negri Rewritten the *Communist Manifesto* for the Twentieth-First Century?,” in *Rethinking Marxism*, Volume 13, No. 3/4, Fall/Winter 2001, pp. 190-198. See also, Michael Rustin, “*Empire*: A Postmodern Theory of Revolution,” in *Debating Empire*, p. 7.

³⁷ See, for instance, Kam Shapiro, “The Myth of the Multitude,” in *Empire’s New Clothes*, pp. 289-314.

³⁸ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 369.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 393-413.

⁴⁰ See Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, pp. 79-93.

“[d]emocracy defines both the goal of the movements and its constant activity,”⁴¹ political ideals and practices that they see as ultimate reflections of the multitude’s potential for “absolute democracy.”⁴²

Yet, what do these anti-globalism movements really signify? Are they clear reflections of the multitude, as Hardt and Negri define this political figure? More critically, in what way does assuming the particular ontology associated with the multitude obfuscate, or at least confound, a clearer understanding of these movements in their pragmatic, and ultimately, *political*, dimensions? Moreover, in what way does the concept of the multitude get in the way of answering the important question proposed in another context and another century: What is to be done? Let me now turn to clarifying their current discussion of the multitude, for it will allow us more clearly to see the dilemmas raised by these questions.

“The Multitude”: What’s in a Name?

The multitude is one concept, in our view, that can contribute to the task of resurrecting or reforming or, really, reinventing the Left by naming a form of political organization and a political project. We do not propose the concept as a political directive—“Form the multitude!”—but rather a way of giving a name to what is already going on and grasping the existing social and political tendency. Naming such a tendency is a primary task of political theory and a powerful tool for further developing the emerging political form.

Hardt and Negri.⁴³

For Hardt and Negri, to name a concept is to produce real effects. Of course, this is not to claim that if one “names” something it will appear *ex nihilo*; Hardt and Negri are

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁴² See *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91; 306-340.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

good materialists, of a certain stripe at least, and would have nothing to do with that type of idealist mysticism. Rather, as they note above, what naming can do is to provide a “tool” in furthering an already “emerging political form.” Yet, in an interesting aside on the Jewish mystical belief of the “golem” early in *Multitude*, they note that there is another way of seeing the power of naming: that it can create unintended consequences. As they convey the kaballah, Jewish creation myths argue that “the name of God has the power to produce life,” and when a Rabbi pronounces God’s name in a certain way over a clay figure, a golem is created. Sifting through various versions of this story, they note that while the golem is created to help the Jewish people, it inevitably proves to be “uncontrollable,” ending up destroying the very people it was supposed to protect. Now, for Hardt and Negri, this becomes an interesting story about war and love.⁴⁴ But, can we not double this aside back on their very attempt to “name” the multitude? How does the very way in which they bring conceptual life to the multitude potentially “destroy” our understanding of this political project? By the particular way they have “named” the multitude, have they created a “golem” that will confound their particular intentions by giving rise to unintended consequences? But, what’s in a name, particularly, the “multitude”?

For Hardt and Negri, the “multitude” is a concept that has multiple, supposedly interconnected, dimensions: ontological, sociological, and political. Ontologically speaking, the multitude names the creative and affirmative emplacement of life, defined by the “coincidence of the common and singularities,”⁴⁵ in which through the common that we share (that is, communication, language, affects) we are each able to express our unique irreducible difference. “The flesh of the multitude,” Hardt and Negri argue, “is pure potential, an unformed life force, and in this sense an element of social being, aimed constantly at the fullness of life. From this ontological perspective, the flesh of the multitude is an elemental power that continuously expands social being, producing in excess of every traditional measure of value.”⁴⁶ Moreover, following Spinoza, this is a multitude that “through reason and passions, in the complex interplay of historical forces,

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-12.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

creates a freedom that [is called] absolute.”⁴⁷ Of course, as befits their immanent ontological position, this is a potential that is constructed in and through history, particularly, the history of struggle against authority and control. Moreover, the potential for a more expansive “fullness of life” ensures a constant desire for an interesting political project only implied so far; namely, the condition Spinoza called “absolute democracy,” in which no representation is necessary but only the flourishing of the already developing common interactions that define human life.⁴⁸ Such an ontological characterization of the multitude is continually referred to in *Multitude* (as well as in *Empire*, though in somewhat different clothing), and indeed it is that which lies behind the clear optimism that courses through their theory. But, the reality of this potential, for Hardt and Negri at least, lies in what is being engendered under Empire itself, that is, the emerging sociological conditions of the multitude.

Sociologically, the multitude names the way in which communicative and affective dimensions to labor (what they call “immaterial labor”) have increasingly created the extensive emergence of constituent power, that is, the way in which all labor is increasingly autonomous and, to use an earlier term of Negri’s, autovalorizing. As they summarize their argument in *Multitude* in this respect:

[T]here is today a progressive becoming common of the various forms of labor throughout the economy and throughout the world. We are witnessing a decline of the previously unbreachable divisions that separated agricultural from industrial workers, the working classes from the poor, and so forth. Instead, increasingly common conditions of labor in all sectors place new importance on knowledge, information, affective relations, cooperation, and communication.⁴⁹

As indicated in this passage, Hardt and Negri spend a fair amount of time differentiating and analyzing the unique “typology” and “topography” of exploitation associated with

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

different forms of labor and seemingly non-labor (e.g., what Marxists called the “lumpenproletariat” and which they name “the poor”), and thereby add an important empirical dimension to this conceptualization of the multitude not present in their previous work.⁵⁰ Yet, in all of these forms of living labor they see the growing hegemony of “immaterial labor,” which reconfigures and makes “common” these unique forms of biopolitical production. In this respect, on a sociological and empirical level the multitude has increasingly a common concern and character, conditions that point to interesting global possibilities for transformation.

On the political level, the multitude is a figure of continuous revolt and contestation, and is particularly conveyed, as we already pointed out, in the relatively explosive growth of movements against global neoliberal regimes. What these movements are articulating are ideals and forms of organization that wouldn’t surprise any observer of the politics of anti-globalism movements: namely, expansive notions of democracy and liberty, that is, a form of “real democracy of the rule by all by all based on relationships of equality and freedom.”⁵¹ Previously, this articulation of democratic demands had been gradually developing in the various struggles associated with communism, socialism, and national liberation during the twentieth century, showing a growing tendency toward “the continuing and unsatisfied desire for more democratic and independent forms of revolutionary organization.”⁵² This democratic telos is now supremely represented in the current form of “network struggle” seen in anti-globalism movements. Moreover, these movements’ constant fight for democratic accountability (e.g., in terms of issues of representation in the WTO), their constant critiques of the privatization of “common” fauna and flora, indigenous knowledges, and communication networks, and, their constant push to reign in the destructive free-flow of international capital (e.g., the proposed Tobin Tax), are direct expressions of the multitude. Indeed, given transmutations associated with the sociological dimension of the multitude we mentioned previously, Hardt and Negri see the proliferation of the democratic demands of such globalist radical movements to represent the gradual unfolding of the ontological potentials associated

⁵⁰ See *Ibid.*, pp. 99-157.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

with the multitude: “. . .[O]ur current situation is propitious not because of the global crisis of democracy, the permanent state of exception, and the interminable global war, but rather because the constituent power of the multitude has matured to such an extent that it is becoming able, through its networks of communication and cooperation, through its production of the common, to sustain an alternative democratic society on its own.”⁵³ In this way, we can see that what originally appeared to be the differing “names” of the multitude—the ontological, the sociological, and the political—are ultimately only different dimensions to mutually interactive discourse.

From Spinoza to Gramsci: Saving Politics From a Certain Ontology?

In [my] postmodern philosophy [the] ontological priority is absolute, because ontology has absorbed the political.

—Negri.⁵⁴

The globalization of the economy, the reduction of the functions and powers of nation-states, the proliferation of international quasi-state organizations—everything points in the direction of complex processes of decision-making that could be approached in terms of hegemonic logics. .

—Ernesto Laclau.⁵⁵

Given the above discussion of Hardt and Negri’s rendering of the multitude—a discussion that does justice neither to the breadth of discussion nor the creative conceptualizations that they offer the reader in their textual performance—we can now begin to answer some of the concerns we have been raising so far. For Hardt and Negri,

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 357.

⁵⁴ Negri, “Kairòs, Alma Venus, Multitudo,” in *Time For Revolution*, M. Mandarini, trans. (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 234.

⁵⁵ Laclau, “Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics,” in J. Butler, E. Laclau, and S. Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 53.

their ontological perspective allows them to do two things in terms of conceptualizing politics: first, it allows them to see the political project as being an imminent development within the biopolitical practices of the multitude. That is, the political project (which is ultimately expressed in the institution of “absolute democracy,” a situation in which each and everyone is controlling their constitution as singularities) is not a transcendent practice, imposed from without, but is developing within very conditions of the increasingly common multitude. This then avoids the potential political problem that Hardt and Negri find to be ultimately problematic: namely, the reinscription of “representation” and “sovereignty” in the name of the multitude (e.g., vanguard parties or even democratic representatives). Second, the ontological dimension—the desire for the fullness of life, and the resistance to that which contains such a flourishing—ultimately ensures a particular optimism concerning the political project of the multitude. Moreover, from their perspective at least, such hope and optimism concerning bringing about a new world is fundamentally “realistic” because it expresses real developments that are “latent and implicit in our social being.”⁵⁶

Aside from removing the transcendentalist pitfalls of earlier political thinking concerning emancipation, and providing a deeply embedded sense of realistic hope, what else does this ontology provide? Well, more problematically, it can provide supposed guarantees for the flourishing of these potential political attributes of the multitude. We thus enter a particular quandary concerning political action, one that befell the Marxist tradition at different times: namely, the political problem of *quietism*. If we are entering a global context in which the multitude is now fully developing its potentialities, and it is increasingly expressing these characteristics in diverse struggles for democracy and justice, then why should we struggle? Or, maybe more relevantly, why not let others struggle? If this is a potential consequence of their conceptualization, then embedded within their ontology is a thoroughly *anti-political potential*. Thus, in a negative sense not intended by Negri in the quote with which we began this concluding section, “ontology has absorbed the political,” that is, consumed and elided the empirical character of a global democratic politics in which struggle, contestation, coalition

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

building, and alliances are extremely important and continuously enacted. It should be clear that both Hardt and Negri consistently claim that there are no absolute guarantees to the political project of the multitude except the struggle itself. But, such a caveat doesn't necessarily take away the problem: it rather displaces it. Political struggle turns into a necessary mediation between Empire and an always already ontological plenitude that just needs the right conditions to flourish. And, which struggle will provide such a mediating process of opening up the multitude's political potential? Unfortunately, from within their problematic all actions that express some form of claims for democracy and justice against the control and authority of Empire become premonitions and/or direct expressions of this "deeper" ontological potential. Thus, once we have given such an ontological "name" to the multitude, its political project becomes something like a force of nature unfolding in its inevitability, gestating in every context. Problematically, the political "convergence" in Seattle in 1999, in which seemingly disparate groups put their differences aside and expressed their common opposition, becomes immediately recognizable: it is the multitude that is finally seeing its truth! "The magic of Seattle," Hardt and Negri aver, "was to show that these many grievances were not just a random, haphazard collection, a cacophony of different voices, but a chorus that spoke in common against the global system."⁵⁷ Yet, as one should know, in Seattle "the magic" didn't just happen, and indeed, even more tragically, will probably never happen again.⁵⁸ Not only were there many months of discussion and coalition building, continuous episodes of contention and contestation among those groups that participated, but, "the example of Seattle" has now become the degree zero for differing authorities around the globe for what must not be allowed to happen. Thus, the character and potential of globalist radical movements is always in flux, given the contingent encounters that occur along their path toward promoting the ideals of democracy and justice. And, given that uncertain pathway, there cannot be any predefined figure that is expressing itself. Yet, because of their strong ontological commitments, we find the articulation of *political* events like Seattle to be one of necessary ontological *expression* and not of contingent

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

⁵⁸ See the discussion of the development of the globalist radical movement associated with Seattle and other events in Ronald Hayduk, "From Anti-Globalization to Global Justice: A Twenty-First-Century Movement," in *Teamsters and Turtles?: U. S. Progressive Political Movements in the 21st Century*, J. Berg, ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 17-50.

political *construction*. From within such a problematic it ultimately becomes senseless to ask the interesting and necessary political questions: How do we transform a “cacophony of different voices” into a “chorus”? If such transformations occurred under particular conditions, how can we replicate them? That is, in what way does our understanding of the contingent construction of a “convergence” like Seattle offer guidelines for future struggles and events? The latter gets to a real important issue confronting political movements, and was expressed in the now time-worn words of Lenin: What is to be done? Now, Hardt and Negri argue that their book is not the place to answer such a question.⁵⁹ Maybe. But, the problem is that, given their ontological “naming” of the multitude, they cannot even properly ask the question itself.

Did the multitude express itself in events like Seattle or Genoa or Miami (and if so, why such different political visages?), or did those political events, due to articulation and conflict, create a context for a “multitude-like” construction of a contingent “common” subjectivity for political struggle? That is, do ontologies determine politics, or does politics, given its unique conditions of articulation, create, *ex post facto*, a sense of ontological sedimentation? If the latter of these questions captures better our sense of the terrain of actually existing political events and actions, then we need to rethink our ontological commitments. Or, maybe better, we need to retrieve the political from the ontological. We need to see, as Ernesto Laclau has been arguing for many years, that it might be better to look again at Gramsci, at least if we retrieve him from a certain Marxism.⁶⁰ While I do not have enough time to fully develop this alternative position, I want to, by way of conclusion, discuss a few issues Laclau’s position raises in terms of understanding globalist radical movements.

It is from Antonio Gramsci’s conception of hegemony that Laclau begins to construct a general theory about political struggle, the character of the social in the contemporary period, and the formation of political identities. While drawing upon different

⁵⁹ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, pp. xvi, 357.

⁶⁰ See the now classic work written with Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), and more recently the dialogue written with Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso Press, 2000).

intellectual traditions and ideas (particularly, poststructuralist thought and discourse theory), Laclau's tantalizing discussions in this respect initiate an important parallel notion of the nature of society to Negri's earlier conception of "antagonism." That is, prior to Negri's immersion into a Spinozist ontological position, "antagonism" can be read as the continual impossibility of the objectivist suturing within the social field, an understanding that we will see is clearly part of Laclau's political position.

Still caught in the essentialist assumptions of a certain Marxism, Laclau and Mouffe argue that Gramsci could not but see that there would be a class core to the "historical blocs" that constituted his notion of "war of position" and "hegemony," and in that sense could not accept fully the democratic implications of the concept of hegemony. In the hands of Laclau and Mouffe, "hegemony" is no longer used to refer to specific political projects tethered to economic classes that reconstitute the social from time to time, but the very process through which, in open-ended and constantly changing ways, social formations and political subjectivities are continually subverted and recreated by diverse social agents: *hegemony* refers to the "contingent articulation of elements around certain social configurations—historical blocs—that cannot be predetermined by any philosophy of history and that is essentially linked to the concrete struggles of social agents."⁶¹ What this implies is a fundamental ontological insecurity to the social itself—what Laclau early on refers to as the "*impossibility of the social*"—in which social relations and institutions are continually open to the subversive effects of diverse forms of discursive political struggle. This further implies that there exists no conceptually graspable unity that endows the social with ultimate meaning, but rather only diverse claims about its meaning that "introduce ambiguities and doubts about the being of objects," arising out of "divergent forces which do not seem to obey any unified or unifying logic."⁶² What then underlies this "radical contingency of the social" is what Laclau and Mouffe call "*antagonism*," what we may ultimately concretize as the presence of alternative discourses of social life which always question the "objectivity" of the

⁶¹Laclau, "Building a New Left," in *Strategies: Journal of Theory, Culture, and Politics*, # 1, 1988, p. 16. This interview has been recently republished in *Strategies for Theory: From Marx to Madonna*, B. Macdonald and R. Rutsky, eds. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), pp. 57-73

⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 15. .

social: “. . .society does not ‘exist’ insofar as objectivity, as a system of differences that establishes the being of entities, always shows the traces of its ultimate arbitrariness and only exists in the pragmatic—and as a consequence always incomplete—movement of its affirmation. The radical contingency of the social shows itself. . .in the experience of antagonism.”⁶³ This does not imply, though, that there are no fixed institutions and practices in the social field—that there is no “society” or “sovereignty,” domestic or global—but only that “society” and “sovereignty” are always partial fixations cemented through active political struggle, one that must be continually maintained through the articulatory practices of political agents.

Importantly, once one positions oneself theoretically with this revamped notion of hegemony one can understand not only the complex and articulated nature of the social (global or otherwise), but also how political subjectivity becomes less an outgrowth of historical necessity and the articulated effects of a social totality and/or ontology (Spinozist or otherwise), and more a complex process of political construction that has neither a necessary predetermined character nor an a priori nodal point for political condensation: in terms of the latter, a hegemonic project can be built from diverse subject-positions (e.g., teamsters, environmentalists, indigenous rights). In this respect, Laclau and Mouffe’s position parallels, yet expands, the logic of Negri’s earlier intimations about the contingent nature of “antagonism” between working class and capital, a situation in which there is no ultimate essentialist resolution, but only partial, temporary, and contingent decompositions and recompositions of working class subjectivity. If political subjectivity is never prefigured in its characteristics, it is also not predetermined in its outcome: there is no a priori progressive quality to political struggles and the formation of consequent political identities. “All struggles,” Laclau and Mouffe note, “whether those of workers or other political subjects, left to themselves, have a partial character, and can be articulated to very different discourses. It is this articulation which gives them their character, not the place from which they came.”⁶⁴

⁶³*Ibid.* For a more detailed philosophical discussion of the nature of “antagonism” see Laclau’s essay “New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time,” in *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (London: Verso Press, 1990), pp. 5-41.

⁶⁴Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 169.

If this is the case, then what provides an important goal for political condensation? Laclau and Mouffe argue that since the French Revolution there has been the gradual unfolding of the democratic imaginary that has at once been part of the actual history of diverse struggles for equality and liberty, but also, in a related way, the demiurge behind the growing instability of the social (the fact that it is radically questioned by more and more political discourses). In this respect, as Laclau and Mouffe explicitly recognize, they are following in the footsteps of Tocqueville's prescient analysis of American democracy.⁶⁵ Once the logic of equality is discursively articulated in one realm of social struggle, it will inevitably become displaced into other realms of struggle, leading to a democratic domino-effect and the creation of new antagonisms. This process of displacement intrinsic to the democratic imaginary is called the "logic of equivalence," and initiates a new "instrument of the production of the social."⁶⁶ Ultimately, if we were to return to our topic at hand, globalist radical movements are the latest manifestation of the "democratic revolution" and its "logic of equivalence":

One cannot understand the present expansion of the field of social conflictuality and the consequent emergence of new political subjects without situating both in the context of the commodification and bureaucratization of social relations on the one hand, and the reformulation of the liberal-democratic ideology—resulting from the expansion of struggles for equality—on the other. For this reason we have proposed that this proliferation of antagonisms and calling into question of relations of subordination should be considered as a moment of deepening of the democratic revolution.⁶⁷

⁶⁵See Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 156, and Chantal Mouffe, "Hegemony and New Political Subjects: Towards a New Concept of Democracy," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, L. Grossberg and C. Nelson, eds. (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 101.

⁶⁶Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 155.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p. 163.

What this does for Laclau and Mouffe is to effectively situate the political importance of social movements (like those associated with globalist radicalism) not only in terms of the gradual unfolding of the discourses of equality and liberty in increasingly diverse areas of global social life, but also as a potential starting point for a radical democratic politics today. This then signifies that the concept of “radical democracy” plays two important, and interrelated, discursive roles: it is at once a concept that empirically renders the diverse struggles for democracy intelligible in their specificity (as aspects of the democratic revolution) while also an ideological and normative goal that operates as a condensation point for collective action.

This latter *normative* dimension to their concept is exhibited in the way in which they see the diversification and plurality of democratic demands to be part of the overall goal of radical democracy itself. That is, radical democracy is a “myth” or horizon that assumes the necessity of diversity, difference and autonomy among political subjects—which they argue tends to be the goal of most of these groups—and promotes the maximum extension of these democratic demands in all areas of social life: “It is not in the abandonment of the democratic terrain but, on the contrary, in the extension of the field of democratic struggles to the whole of civil society and the state, that the possibility resides for a hegemonic strategy of the left.”⁶⁸ Moreover, in this political project there are no guarantees, and Laclau and Mouffe argue there must be a continual negotiation between promoting democratic demands that are shared by the plurality of groups (a shared sense of promoting the “democratic revolution”), and insuring that each of these diverse groups retain the capacity for controlling the movement of the hegemonic articulation in their own spheres. And it is here that we begin to see how such issues link up to our discussion of emerging global political subjects who will be by definition diverse and differentiated. For, to articulate normative goals on the global level demands a willingness to let go of universalist pretensions and postures:

The discourse of radical democracy is no longer the discourse of the universal; the epistemological niche from which ‘universal’ classes and

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, p. 176.

subjects spoke has been eradicated, and it has been replaced by a polyphony of voices, each of which constructs its own irreducible discursive identity. This point is decisive: there is no radical and plural democracy without renouncing the discourse of the universal and its implicit assumption of a privileged point of access to ‘the truth’, which can be reached only by a limited number of subjects.⁶⁹

While many critics of Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxism have argued that their notion of hegemony, and the related conception of the contingency of social life, ignores the resistant macrostructures that all political agents confront in pursuing a radical democratic project,⁷⁰ I think such a critique, while interesting, misses what is so important about his characterization of political subjects, particularly when related to the global dimensions of radical politics. While Laclau and Mouffe do premise their political analysis on the concrete contingencies of diverse political subjects, and in that sense shifts their analysis away from macrostructures, they have at the same time reasserted a macropolitical perspective of the goals of radical democracy that is imbricated intimately with the concrete particularities of political agency. That is, the claim that political subjectivity must be seen as unanchored and decentered allows one to articulate the overall direction of the contingent practices of radical democracy, without at the same time denying the unique micropolitical exigencies of each actor within this political practice. To use a now worn example from Seattle: it allows Teamsters and Turtles to protest in the streets together, battling for democracy and justice, and yet not lose their specificity as unique political actors.

Indeed, in its *concrete pragmatic dimension*, radical democracy (which can be summed up by the goal of “equality and freedom for all”⁷¹) must also be grounded in the discourses of each of these globalist social movements, in which political struggle is

⁶⁹Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, pp. 191-192.

⁷⁰See Douglas Kellner and Stephen Best, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (New York: Guilford Press, 1991), pp. 200-204.

⁷¹Mouffe, “Radical Democracy,” p. 34.

engaged by articulating a well-defined, though not necessarily predetermined, notion of the political subject. Laclau and Mouffe clearly recognize this when he argues that “radical democracy” must accept the “polyphony of voices, each of which constructs its own irreducible discursive identity.” That is, in the global world of political struggle and ideological conflict, there is less an elision of political subjectivity than its assertion, a process in which essentialist assumptions and universalist aspirations abound. It is this assertion of identity (“equality and freedom for me and my kind”)—neither totally etched in stone prior to political struggle nor completely decentered and lacking unity—that allows each particular movement to be the motive force for the partial realization of radical democracy. Political agency arises from the process of articulating these identity discourses, an engagement that, given the practical exigencies of the political world, sets the stage for diverse reinterpretations and re-renderings. Thus, from this perspective, global political actors continually engage in a form of “strategic essentialism” that motivates his/her action in the political world, engendering at the same time a discursive palimpsest that is partially erased and incorporated into new senses of one’s political identity based upon that very action.⁷²

While there have been interesting applications of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of politics and society on a number of different domestic level issues,⁷³ there have not been many reflections on their applicability on the international level, particularly in relation to anti-globalism movements and other radical figures haunting the current corridors of globalization. This is strange, for, if anything, his theory is highly suited for an analysis of radicalism on the global level. Not only does their notion of the “impossibility of the social” give theoretical figuration to the converging, yet detotalized, international practices associated with our world political economy, but their notion of political subjectivity, as a fluctuating identity that is grounded within the contingent articulations of social actors and subsequent events, clearly captures the dimensions of radical

⁷²See Laclau, “Universalism, Particularism and the Question of Identity,” in *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso Press, 1996), pp. 20-35, where he explicitly argues for the intricate differential tension between particularity and universality in political movements.

⁷³ See, for example, the collection of diverse applications in *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies, and Social Change*, D. Howarth, A. Norval, and Y. Stavrakakis, eds. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

movements associated with the anti-globalism struggles, such as those that fused during the now famous events of Seattle in 1999. In this respect, Laclau's theory can provide useful set of tools for understanding potential and character of globalist radical movements today without relying upon problematic ontological assumptions.

One easy route to understanding globalist radicalism is to see it as a necessary outgrowth of capitalist structures, or at least a consequence of their developing correlative ontological potentials (associated with "the multitude," for instance). Yet such materialist and/or ontological assurances confront the inevitable empirical reality of the dispersal of these movements themselves, i.e., that they are struggling for different issues and concerns related to their own particularities within the very background of neo-liberal regimes of globalization. So, for instance, we have unions concerned about the outsourcing of jobs associated with free trade policies, and we have environmentalists concerned about the eradication of environmental regulations in free trade agreements. In the US context, of course, this does not a guarantee an automatic coalition of these groups against what seems to be the same issue: "free trade policies/agreements." For, what the latter means for each is different, and their identities have other elements that can also provide important blockages toward a hegemonic articulation. Indeed, as is well known, unions have been deeply concerned with how environmental policies have eradicated good paying jobs in various sectors of the domestic economy, leading to the famous union/environmentalist "divide" that has arisen in political discourses in American politics. How then do we understand the very co-mingling of unionists and environmentalists that we find in Anti-WTO struggles? Again, what we have here is not a reflection of a deep ontological identity or an economic dictum that must express itself; rather, what we have here is a contingent political construction that arose via what Laclau and Mouffe call the "logic of equivalence." In the context of these anti-WTO struggles, each particular political identity becomes destabilized in their original character via the discursive construction of signifiers of unification and action, and the resistance of particular authorities to such occurrences. Thus, we find the elaboration of what Laclau has called an "empty signifier" in political action that provides a potent condensation point for unified struggle against an opposing force associated with the WTO and/or neo-

liberal globalism.⁷⁴ In the process, each political subject shares a discursive space that allows them to articulate and struggle for similar issues and goals.

Unfortunately, remaining space does not permit a deeper analysis of how a version of Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist theory would provide an important way to articulate the potentials and character of globalist radicalism. I hope that what I have said in the last part of this essay clearly points to the positive explanatory value their theory holds in this respect. At the very least, my purpose has been to provide an initial characterization that may provide an impetus for others to elaborate and develop such a position more thoroughly. In conclusion, I would like to respond briefly to what will be frequent questions raised by situating oneself within this theoretical horizon of characterizing globalist radicalism.

Would a post-Marxist theory provide institutional guidelines to the furthering of the global radical project? While such a theory performs a metapolitical position that accepts already existing organizational forms as the basis from which to understand the potentials and character of globalist radicalism (and, in that way, is silent on particular forms of organization), it does not ignore the issue altogether. Given a commitment to radical democracy as a defining goal, a true movement toward global radical democracy will have to be one based upon those democratic principles themselves. As with Hardt and Negri, it thus celebrates one of the most interesting aspects to current radical movements: their commitment to democratic organizational practices. Would it adequately render the new global democratic movements in their diversity, singularity, not to mention, in their potential for political unification? In seeing the global world as a relatively open social context that is never fully sutured or structured in the political sense, it clearly takes seriously the diversity and singularity of diverse global democratic movements. Yet, such a position also recognizes the way in which any political subject has a potential for initiating a "logic of equivalence" and engendering a hegemonic process toward global

⁷⁴ Laclau, "Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?," in *Emancipation(s)*, pp. 36-46.

transformation. Moreover, in the process of that hegemonic project, inevitably the original identities of the political subjects involved are transformed and rearticulated onto a more universal and generalizable discourse of identity and struggle. Would such a theory be able to provide an adequate ideal for global radical struggle? As many people have argued, what seems to provide an important point of political condensation and strategic unification for current anti-globalism struggles is their commitment to furthering democracy. In resolutely situating one's analysis within the horizon of the "democratic movement" and the ideal of "radical democracy," such a position puts forward a very constructive and pragmatic ideal, indeed.