A REVIEW OF:


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Declaration is the 5th book by the influential intellectual duo of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and the first after their trilogy of Empire (2001), Multitude (2005) and Commonwealth (2011). It is a ‘just on time’ intervention of the two intellectuals on the present moment and the cycle of struggles springing up around the world in 2011. Thus, its size and style resembles more a pamphlet, rather than the wider and more theoretical analysis taking place in their trilogy. Declaration is a book about the subjects of the crisis, their struggle and how this should take a step further, moving from a declaration to a constitution. It will be of high interest for those engaged with radical political theory and those who have been active in the movements of the last years. When it comes to the matter in hand, though, i.e the ways that such movements can bring an actual change, Hardt’s and Negri’s analysis finds a wall, as it seemed to be happening also in their trilogy.

The fact that Hardt and Negri have intervened in the present moment is no surprise. They have been described as strong intellectual inspirations for the horizontal and polymorphic movements springing up since the late 1990s, such as the Global Justice Movement. Paul Mason has named ‘autonomism’ as the major theoretical influence in the recent protest events around the world (2012, p. 44). This autonomism owes a lot of its current shaping and formulation to Hardt and Negri.

The analysis elaborated in their trilogy constitutes the starting point of their Declaration. Emphasis is given on how this is a crisis of the ‘post-Fordist’ model which has as its dominating form the ‘cognitive’ (or immaterial) labour. Capital’s profits are not so much based on the direct extraction of surplus value, but on taking advantage through rent of the immaterial products of the expanded working class’ co-operation: services, codes, information, emotions etc. This expanded working class takes the form of what Hardt and Negri called the ‘multitude’, i.e those working and living under the rule of capital. The multitude is, thus, not only a subject of exploitation, but also a creator of social life, in what Hard and Negri call ‘biopolitical production’. A crisis in this latest form of capitalism must de facto be quite devastating, as what has taken place is the ‘real subsumption of life’ under capital, i.e the penetration of capitalist relations in the sphere not only of the production, but also of the reproduction of social life (health, education, free time etc). As they have put it, capital puts life to work (2012, p. 49). This form of
social formation in the current paradigm, which is based more on horizontal networks and loose structures, rather than the vertical strict lines of the Fordist model, bears within it the potential for its Nemesis, which Hard and Negri described in the Multitude as “an absolutely democratic organization that corresponds to the dominant forms of economic and social production” (2000, p.88). For the two authors, the protesters in Tahrir, Syntagma, Puerta del Sol and in the squares of the US and the UK, hint towards the aforementioned description.

What is new in the Declaration? Mainly the four abstract and universal figures that according to the two thinkers rise as subjects of the current crisis: the indebted, the mediatised, the securitized and the represented. The indebted is the figure whose life, according to Hardt and Negri, comes close to a situation of servitude, with the debt (private or national) operating as a chain in his legs. The mediatised is the one who lives and produces in networks; a procedure which is, though, alienated by the means through which this communication takes place. Here Hardt and Negri could be considered vulnerable to criticism on ‘technophobia’. They mention that “with your smart phone and your wireless connections, you can go anywhere and still be on the job” (2012, p. 16), which seems quite a narrow view on the potential that this technology is unleashing, among others, for effectively organizing the struggles of today. The securitized is the figure which is constantly under the surveillance of the Empire’s mechanisms; or as Foucault would have put it, to Empire’s biopower (meaning its capacity not only to dictate, but also to ‘create’ social life). Lastly, the represented is the subject with a limited capacity for participation in political life, who has recently even seen his elected representatives stepping aside for unelected bureaucrats (case of Monti in Italy and Papademos in Greece).

At that point, the narrative in the book changes and the bleak picture of the crisis give its place to what they authors name a kairos of resistance and rebellion. In the last decades, the thought of Negri has been obviously influence by Foucauldian elements. Together with Hardt, they believe firmly in the dialectic relationship between power and resistance. Thus, the four subject of the crisis can be transformed to four subversive figures. The indebted realizes that his predicament links him with other under the burden of debt and, thus, new social bonds are created. The mediatised is used to work and produce in networks; suddenly, he comes in physical contact with others in the squares and they form a community of resistance. The securitized overcomes his fear and flees away from his prison (Hardt and Negri fail to tell us how) and the represented realizes his capability for direct democratic action. Thus, the figure of the commoner rises, as the subject whose biopolitical production outside the rule of capital for the creation of the commons makes him a universal subversive figure.

Somewhere here is where the analysis becomes problematic and escapes to the realm of wishful thinking. Hardt and Negri claim that it is of urgent need for the multitude to apply democratic power in order to bring rapid change in important social and environmental issues. However, as they are fast to mention, they do not know how this could happen (p. 59). They reject the idea of the party, as it would not fit with the horizontalist character of the multitude. They name the Left as the “parties of the lament” and they consider its project as obsolete: “We need to empty the churches of the Left even more, and bar their doors and burn them down! ( p. 107). They celebrate the character of Occupy as a “happening” and a”performance” (p. 18) and there is very little criticism on its obvious flaws or on why it vanished so quickly. They place really high
goals, such as on how “every social function regulated by the state that could be equally well managed in common should be transferred to common hands” (p. 79). They even talk about the need to transform banks and use them for the service of public good (p. 75). However, since they seem to reject the taking of state power, it remains quite unclear how these objects could materialize.

As all of the duo’s books, Declaration captures the attention and paints a bright picture for the prospects the multitude faces to escape a rule of capital which has been considered as parasitic. However, at the end it leaves a strong feeling of scepticism. In a time when the capital is expelling an ever growing part of the labour force from the production and from social life itself, how could it be argued that the multitude can just flee away? Where would such an exodus lead to? If the idea of a strong political party taking power is obsolete, how can the multitude materialize any possible victories that it can achieve in the streets or the squares? Has the crisis and all the contradictions that have exploded brought the multitude in an even more In a way, one could argue that Hardt and Negri perfectly represent the grassroots movements that have taken upon the streets in 2011: their theoretical gaps and flows are the same gaps and flaws that prevented these movements to make the decisive step forward.

References


Hardt, M. & Negri, A. (2012), Declaration, Argo