

THEME SECTION

**The *Empire* debate: Hardt and Negri's  
anthropological encounter**

*Edited by*

Ara Wilson



# Anthropology and the radical philosophy of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt

Ara Wilson

---

*Abstract:* The trilogy by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004), and *Commonwealth* (2009), is among the major works of political theory to emerge in this century, with specific relevance for anthropological analyses of global power. This introduction provides a synthetic overview of the conflicted encounter between anthropologists (John Kelly, Aihwa Ong, Anna Tsing, and Sylvia Yanagisako) and Hardt and Negri's vision that is staged in this thematic cluster of *Focaal*. It reviews the anthropologists' three main critiques of the Empire trilogy, the analysis of state and labor, the scale of analysis, and the ethics of global theorizing, which point to an apparent disciplinary rift between global ethnography and radical philosophy. This disciplinary rift is itself characterized differently by anthropologists and Michael Hardt, which I suggest results from different modalities for depicting social dynamics.

*Keywords:* anthropological theory, empire, multitude, radical philosophy

Can critical anthropology share the same world as radical political philosophy? This special section of *Focaal* explores this cohabitation through a critical dialogue between four anthropologists and the work of the radical political theorists Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, authors of the significant Empire trilogy, including *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004), and *Commonwealth* (2009).

The work of Hardt and Negri has inspired engagements worldwide, including analytical assessments that explore the trilogy's legal theory, its treatment (or neglect) of feminist thought, and its religiously inflected vocabulary.<sup>1</sup> Their work invites reflection by anthropology, a discipline with deep resources for analyzing global

power formations. How does the ethnographic vision articulate with that of radical philosophy? How does the ethnographic analysis of heterogeneous forms of social power and practice mesh with Hardt and Negri's visions of empire, multitude, and commonwealth? Do the texts by anthropologists and radical theorists diverge because of divergent modes of research and writing or divergent politics of knowledge?

This special theme of *Focaal* invited four anthropologists of globality to critically engage with this ambitious political philosophy: John Kelly, Aihwa Ong, Anna Tsing, and Sylvia Yanagisako. And critical they are, marshaling the ethnographer's commitment to situated, particular analysis to challenge core elements in

Hardt and Negri's theories on factual, analytical, and ethicopolitical grounds, as outlined here. The special section concludes with Michael Hardt's response to the comments, in which he recasts the disciplinary divide between radical theory and anthropology to emphasize their deep convergences. Together, this discussion stages the difference between radical political philosophy and a global anthropology over "what global capitalism is and how to study it," in Tsing's words. This discussion offers material for reflection on the friction of "disciplinary divisions and methodological differences," as Hardt puts it in his response, in the encounters of those whom in the present juncture might otherwise be seen as intellectual and political fellow travelers.

### The trinity

Three major texts of political philosophy to emerge in the twenty-first century are Hardt and Negri's Empire trilogy: *Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth*. In the Marxist tradition of knowledge production, these works describe the world in order to change it. With a radical account of power and democratic possibility in the globalized world, the Hardt-Negri trilogy stages the ambitious argument that globalization has reorganized the worldwide circuitry of power, and hence has also reorganized the grounds for resistance and transformation in the subjects, knowledge, and resources of our globalized era. A nexus of capital, states, and institutions forms a new global power that generates new modes of human life; these modes of being in turn are creating—or perhaps, *should* create—a process of liberatory change. Hardt and Negri's work is predicated on philosophical critiques consistent with the orientations of the authors to continental critical theory (notably Negri's engagement with Spinoza, as John Kelly discusses in his contribution). Their arguments are, as Hardt emphasizes in his response here, also based on empirical and political arguments about governance, power, social life, and resistance. In particular, the authors' assertion that

the realities of sovereignty and production have changed relies on empirical assessments. With such a broad scope, the authors understand their writing as an interdisciplinary project, "equally philosophical and historical, cultural and economic, political and anthropological" (Hardt and Negri 2000). As John Kelly writes in this special issue, these works "provided a global vocabulary for considering emergent global political and cultural phenomena." Their subject matter—reorganization of life under global forms of power—and their analytical commitments to immanent analysis resonate with those of critical anthropology.

*Empire* offers a reading of global power in the post-Cold War era. Their proposal is that "sovereignty has taken a new form, composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule" (Hardt and Negri 2000: xii). They see new flows of power beyond the historical hegemonies of specific nation-states, particularly rejecting an image of a singular hegemony of United States imperialism (Hardt and Negri 2000: xiv). (The book was published before the United States' global war on terror following 11 September 2001.) Recognizing analytical critiques of, and economic challenges to, national sovereignty, *Empire* identifies a new world order, a transnational biopower organized by global capitalism. The authors understand this world order as comprised of plural networks. Power nodes—the United States, Microsoft, the United Nations—coalesce into a decentered transnational apparatus of rule, a network of states, multilateral institutions, and corporations. *Empire* is predicated on these assessments of changing conditions for extracting value and establishing order on human populations. Its panoramic account of global power has relevance for a critical post-colonial anthropology that has rejected the research unit defined by culture boundaries in favor of research designed to capture wide-reaching state, regional, and transnational processes. *Empire* likewise has sympathies with ethnohistories of colonial and postcolonial milieus that chronicle the production of European sovereignty through the fraught exploitative

subsumption of other peoples into Euro-American empires.

Hardt and Negri's second volume, *Multitude*, categorizes a diverse set of activities as a new, prevailing mode of labor that is associated with the management of life, knowledge, and affect. If the current form of sovereignty is a global biopolitical enterprise—empire—then the relevant political subjects within it are those involved in its modus operandi, in the production of life. Significantly, their analysis of the political implications of this global power firmly departs from templates available from old lefts, working-class parties, or state socialism, but not at all from a Marxist logic. As new networks of control develop to create value from managing life, Hardt and Negri argue, new circuits of cooperation and collaboration emerge, which are the source of potential resistance. Hardt and Negri locate the political potential for resisting this empire within its own system, in this new organization of labor itself.

The authors propose the religiously shaded term “multitude” over other available terms for exploited and resisting populations—masses, the people, the working class—which they find impose a uniformity on diversity. Referring to all manner of work involved in the management of life, “multitude” encompasses a wider swathe of “workers” than organized labor or peasant uprisings, to include paid and unpaid labor outside of what is normally recognized as the sphere of production, the factory, plantation, or mine. The conception of multitude resonates with investigations of grassroots mobilizations and everyday resistance that do not take the form of organized, mostly male workers challenging capital, the focus of so much radical scholarship before, and alas well after, feminist interventions. Hardt and Negri's vision of multitude could apply to (and be enriched by) the ethnographic archive on vernacular forms of resistance and on new movements, including accounts of alter-globalization protests, queer world making, or struggles over living conditions.<sup>2</sup> Aihwa Ong's path-breaking analysis of the new proletariat, the Third World woman on the assembly line, expanded the Marxist under-

standing of resistance predicated on male shop floor struggle by interpreting the embodied acts and nonpolitical idioms as resistance expressed at the juncture of transnational capital, the Malay state, and Malay gender and kinship systems (Ong 1987). Her reconceptualization of resistance to global capitalism as corporeal, affective, and symbolic foreshadows much of the argument found in *Multitude*.

*Commonwealth*, the 2009 final volume of the Hardt and Negri trilogy, charts the resources for social life under the empire of capitalism. In particular, *Commonwealth* is interested in potential new forms of property (in the commons) and polity (in different visions of communism). Rather than envision a return to precapitalist shared spaces, this book traces the Western history of property, poverty, and the state to outline the resulting social world and the potentialities within it. The aim is to identify what resources might be produced through capitalist systems that manage to remain beyond capture. Thus, Hardt and Negri argue that the labor process harnessed by capital—which their view understands broadly as the labor of the multitude producing forms of life—also produces a common. That is, capitalism generates its Other: the economic mode of empire not only exploits, but also generates, common resources. They write that “contemporary capitalist production by addressing its own needs is opening up the possibility of and creating the bases for a social and economic order grounded in the common” (Hardt and Negri 2009: x). This particular dialectic of capitalism creating a commons hinges on seeing the immaterial arena as resources. They emphasize networks, language, and affect as vital to the operations of this incarnation of global capital. Valorizing symbolic, cultural, and emotional domains as the very stuff of political struggle against empire echoes an array of arguments found in feminist and queer theory, radical aesthetic philosophy, or the cultural and affective turn in social theory. It bolsters anthropological depictions of ways that people have redeployed the symbolic and social channels that also oppress them.

## The quartet

The anthropologists commenting here—John Kelly, Aihwa Ong, Anna Tsing, and Sylvia Yanagisako—are known for complex depictions of globalization in the Asia-Pacific, in Europe, and in specific transnational flows. Because of their thorough engagements with critical theory and their explorations of state and economic power, I see them as critical anthropologists (if not self-styled activist anthropologists per se). John Kelly’s study of globality takes the form of research on colonial Fiji and on baseball as an international project, as well as on US and French military theories of counterinsurgency, that is, the investments of state powers in analyzing the insurgence of the multitude. In addition to her work cited above, Aihwa Ong has advanced models for understanding the concrete forms of globalization by investigating how assemblages of governments, public culture, and global capital generate subjectivities, territory, and power (Ong 1987, 2006; Ong and Collier 2005). In her piece here, she draws on recent research on new forms of biopower, sovereignty, and capital in Asia (e.g., Ong and Chen 2010). Anna Tsing’s work recasts global/local binaries through nuanced ethnographies of the periphery, the Indonesian hinterlands, work that calls attention to the very production of globality through embedded real-world processes predicated on diversity (Tsing 1993, 2005). Sylvia Yanagiasko’s long-term research in Italy has analyzed the mutually constitutive interplay of culture and capital through intricate study of the social infrastructure of family-based manufacturing firms (Yanagisako 2002).

Arguably, much of these scholars’ own well-known explorations of globalization resonate in important ways with the commitments of *Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth*. Yet, as their articles show, the four anthropologists commenting here resist being swept up in this radical philosophy of democratic possibilities, for reasons that are simultaneously empirical, theoretical, and political. As is evident from their forceful critiques, they disagree with the

radical political philosophers over “what global capitalism is and how to study it.” The criticisms focus most strongly on the claims of the first two volumes, *Empire* and *Multitude*—taking issue with the analysis of a global empire of capital and its characteristic logic of immaterial labor—although Tsing’s discussion directly engages those of *Commonwealth* as well. Below, I offer a synthetic account of the main elements of these anthropological criticisms—questions about the analysis of state and labor, about the scale of analysis, and about the ethics of radical theory—before offering reflections on this apparent disciplinary schism between the ethnographic and the philosophical interpretations of the human world.

An obvious task for anthropologists engaging radical philosophy is to evaluate its evidentiary claims. Just as Karl Marx drew on Lewis Henry Morgan’s accounts of the Iroquois (a debt noted by Hardt and Negri [2009: 87–88]), Hardt and Negri draw on empirical descriptions of social worlds, for example, in their portraits of knowledge labor. Their argument is predicated on a reading of history. Even so simple a sentence as the opening of *Commonwealth* makes an evidentiary assertion: “War, suffering, and exploitation increasingly characterize our globalizing world.” The adverb *increasingly* presents an empirical argument about an intensification in recent years. The overall argument of the *Empire* trilogy hinges on a portrait of historical transformation and social processes. Among the questions anthropologists address then is, are they right? Are Hardt and Negri accurate in their depiction of emerging forms of social relations, subjectivity, and collectivity? Does their depiction of such trends match realities around the world?

Not surprisingly, this set of anthropologists takes issue with the accuracy of Hardt and Negri’s cartography of global modernity. Disputes about fact are significant to the extent that they challenge the premises of, and hence the validity of, overall arguments. Specifically, the anthropological interlocutors criticize two depictions key to Hardt and Negri’s accounts: the place of the state in “empire” and the history, prevalence,

and forms of labor in twentieth- to twenty-first-century capitalism.

Hardt and Negri are aware of charges of Eurocentrism. They take heed of the ways that “many analyses neglect the forms of domination and control located outside Europe, conceiving them merely as echoes of European domination” (2009: 70). Yet Aihwa Ong, in her article in this issue, finds that Hardt and Negri still “see an American Empire as unchallenged in the world.” Ong insists that the authors are in fact neglecting Europe’s others, in ways that has implications for their analysis of empire. She argues that attention to China, understood as the rising global power of the twenty-first century, alters Hardt and Negri’s analysis of the state’s position vis-à-vis capital. Her point is not the otherwise widely available charge that Hardt and Negri are Eurocentric (although she also notes their “Christian fervor”), but rather its consequence: that the lack of attention to actually existing Asian states and Asian finance affects their understanding of sovereignty in relation to capital and biopower. While Hardt and Negri present a view of “capitalism steamrolling over political sovereignty,” Ong argues that capitalism has actually strengthened the Chinese state, even its authoritarian rule. The capacious abilities of the Chinese state, and capitalism with Chinese characteristics, show that, first, state sovereignty is not reducible or identical to capitalist forces, but are separate “technologies of power” that interact, particularly in postcolonial countries in which sovereignty was a hard-won achievement; and second, that strong developmentalist states respond to crisis by manipulating capitalist circuits. A factor enabling such manipulations is the legacy of socialist self-understanding. Harnessing flows of capital to sites within China in turn reorganizes the relationship between sovereign powers, global markets, and labor. Her critique renders Hardt and Negri’s analytical claims into questions for ethnographic research: what is the relation of neoliberal plans, state policies, and corporate practice?

Along with Ong, Sylvia Yanagisako and Anna Tsing challenge the Hardt-Negri paradigms of empire and multitude. Hardt and Negri’s ar-

gument hinges on an understanding of a historical shift in capital, as “the assembly line has been replaced by the network as the organizational model of production” (2000: 295) and “the newly dominant forms of production that involve information, codes, knowledge, images, and affects” (2009: ix). On one hand, the anthropologists here endorse Hardt and Negri’s recognition of immaterial labor. As feminists have noted, Marxist and other production-centered frameworks have long neglected the gendered work of paid and unpaid services. Hardt and Negri’s view of labor departs from the tradition of political economic thought that gives near exclusive attention to the male proletariat’s shop floor struggles. The vision of political subjects, accordingly, is far wider than the orthodox Marxist view, encompassing the kinds of positions occupied by women or marginalized workers as well as middle-class occupations. On the other hand, the anthropologists of globalization challenge Hardt and Negri’s portrait of immaterial labor. Here they do so in two ways: by questioning the assertion that there is a new hegemony of immaterial labor and by rejecting a binary between immaterial and material modes of work. Multitude may be more inclusive than the proletariat, but nonetheless presents a “categorical unity” (Yanagisako, this issue; Kelly, this issue).

The anthropology of globalization calls attention to how economic classifications are made and deployed. These anthropologists’ rejection of the immaterial/material binary involves evaluative and empirical dimensions. Conceptually, the material/immaterial divide recapitulates the mental/manual distinction that is implicated in hierarchical valuations of work (Yanagisako, this issue) and that philosophically “seems an obstructionist Cartesian commitment, mimicking earlier histories of exclusion in mirror image” (Tsing, this issue). Ethnographic studies of work find that immaterial and material modes are often inextricable. For example, Yanagisako’s research (2002) demonstrates that information networks, affect, and unpaid labor were integral to production in twentieth-century Italy.

Moreover, the valorization of immaterial labor, the commentators suggest, recapitulates the capitalist hype about the postindustrial knowledge economy, thereby legitimizing the global North elite's claims to a greater share of profit. Valorizing immaterial labor, Yanagisako and Tsing propose, means buying the sales pitch of Western capital, which institutionalizes the greater economic value of the technoentrepreneurial work centered in the global North. Tsing illustrates the geopolitical complicity of economic categorization with the example of business standards, showing how the change from emphasizing standardization of labor and raw materials to emphasizing standardization of inventory has affected exploitation of labor and nature. Yanagisako's research (2002) similarly finds that the Italian firms' calculus of value emphasizes their own contribution over the material production that is outsourced to China. While immaterial labor is "good to think with," Tsing (this issue) says, "it seems a bad idea to take it for granted." Accepting immaterial labor as the dominant form accepts a categorization that is deployed to profit the global North.

Much of the anthropological critique of Hardt and Negri's analysis of labor takes issue with the notion that one form of labor can be hegemonic. If the immaterial form of labor does not in fact depict a majority of capitalist businesses—we still have plantations and factories, after all—then what does hegemony signify? Can an abstract form be hegemonic? Do workers distinguish between immaterial and material work and do they consider the immaterial form dominant? For the anthropologists, then, whether or not immaterial modes of labor are hegemonic is a question that can be addressed through ethnography in simultaneously empirical and analytical ways. And in their research, they find that workers do *not* experience a divide between immaterial and material modes of labor. In short, while the ethnographers of globalization endorse deconstructing a Marxist prioritization of proletariat shop floor struggles, they offer skepticism about instead prioritizing immaterial labor, seeing this valuation as a prof-

itable ideological strategy that "obscures the communicative dimension of all human activity, whether it is labeled *economic activity* or otherwise," in Yanagisako's words, as well as obscuring the material dimensions of immaterial realms.

### The ethnographic situation

Hardt and Negri's politics depart from older forms of radical critique, particularly those associated with orthodox Marxism, communist states, or organized parties. A hallmark of their work is their articulation of an immanent analysis, one that identifies actually existing conditions and trends. Negri and Hardt insist that future action emerges from "objective conditions." They aim to chart the "struggle for freedom *within* the power relation of modernity" (2009: 101; emphasis added). That is, they do not locate the source of transformation to human arrangements from outside of the social systems, but identify animating tendencies from within. Capital, Hardt and Negri write, "depends for its survival and development on productive subjectivities that are internal but antagonistic to it" (2009: ix). This approach is predicated on a rejection of transcendence, whether religious or dialectical. The philosophical roots are explored in Kelly's article here and in much of the available commentary on Negri and his coauthored trilogy (Passavant and Dean 2004).

I am not convinced that the European philosophical archive is the most relevant resource for contemplating anthropological engagements with Hardt and Negri's intellectual method. The commitment to an immanent critique<sup>3</sup> might also be read in relation to an ethnographic gaze or even an empirical (not empiricist) orientation that approaches actually existing social regimes—or assemblages of people, objects, ideas—with cultivated agnosticism about their place in an abstract schema of human development. Much work in science and technology studies (STS), for example, pursues this approach. Tracing emergent tendencies, which is

what work on assemblages can be seen to do, attempts to avoid the unidirectional teleology of scientific Marxism through what are arguably evidentiary descriptions of human life.

Hardt and Negri's emphasis on tendencies expressed by existing political practices resonates with the anthropological perspective on examining actually existing social life. Anthropologists have graduated from the synchronic culturalist explanations of Clifford Geertz and from bound communities as objects. Critical anthropologists and radical philosophers share a commitment to examining social life embedded in broader social dynamics that do not follow an externally derived path. Yet the immanent approach of Hardt and Negri is not identical to the anthropological lens outlined in these comments, and or with its vocabulary of situation, assemblage, scale, and context. Against the ethnographic insistence on the significance of difference, junctures, and situations, the anthropologists say, Hardt and Negri's interpretations of immanent and emerging social patterns remain abstract, general, and even totalizing.

The anthropological critics writing here find in the accounts of empire and multitude revamped versions of globality that aspire to a form of universality. Not surprisingly, many anthropological readers have found the portrait of empire too unitary, totalizing, and directional: a "unified totalizing biopower" and "unified capitalist system-logic," in Ong's words (this issue). Taking on Negri's theoretical apparatus in particular, Kelly finds such tendencies inherent even in the use of immanence: "We must again be skeptical of tales of immanence and transcendence if both find too much in global abstraction," Kelly (this issue) suggests in his criticism of the foundations of this radical philosophy. Yanagisako suggests that the immanence of this radical theory in fact functions as a form of transcendence.

Contemporary anthropology's greatest contribution to discussions of globalization is arguably the analysis of situation, scale, difference, and context. For Ong (this issue), anthropological analysis is "situated, limited, and melancholic, but hopeful." This melancholy perhaps

echoes David Scott's use of tragedy as a genre for the disappointed evaluations of revolutions: "[F]or tragedy the relation between past, present, and future is never a Romantic one in which history rides a triumphant and seamlessly progressive rhythm, but a broken series of paradoxes and reversals in which human action is ever open to unaccountable contingencies—and luck" (Scott 2004). Not surprisingly, the anthropological commentators find an ethnographic temperament lacking in Hardt and Negri's collaboration.

John Kelly outlines an understanding of situation as a structuring intermediate between immanence and globality, the two poles of Hardt and Negri's analysis. If anthropology has left the culture-bound society behind and turned its attention in fact to the integration of sites in broader social orbits, it still insists on "a mediating dialectic of an intermediate history of social forms and institutions," in Kelly's words (this issue). This concept of situation draws on some of the similar precedents to Hardt and Negri's work. Aihwa Ong (this issue) emphasizes "configurations shaped by the interaction of global and situated components," which characterizes her own project on global assemblages. In her depiction of a situated study of globality, Ong uses images of altitude, describing "a low-flying approach to emerging situations crystallized by the interconnections of capital and politics, technology and ethics." Kelly (this issue) also wants analyses oriented to "scales that can actually be observed, which is to say, less than global."

For anthropologists, reality is always more complicated on the ground, to use a realist vocabulary to which these authors would not subscribe. As Ong (this issue) says, "Anthropology at its best can provide an analytical understanding of unfolding situations linked to wider spirals of transformation but always particular in its momentum and motion." Conversely, anthropologists concretize abstractions. The anthropologists here clearly chafe at the perceived unification of purpose across disparate situations. Their critique of Negri and Hardt raises the question, what is the relationship between

the ethnographic situation and immanent analysis? Or more broadly, what is the place of ethnographic particularism in radical theory?

### **Ethics and the multitude**

The force of the anthropological critiques in these pages reflects unease with the positioning of the radical intellectual. Some of this may draw on years of the field's own reflection on the place of the ethnographer in research and on the political aesthetics and representative power of ethnographic writing. Hardt and Negri locate the "the emergence of the multitude as a political actor" within the milieu of the multitude: their political agency "relies entirely on the immanence of decision making within the multitude" (2009: xiii). If the multitude is becoming a political force through the contradictions of its location and work, then what is the role of radical writing about this process? What, in political terms, are the authors as writers and intellectuals? Hardt and Negri's analysis, by situating knowledge workers within the multitude, situate radical philosophers in the multitude as well. As Yanagisako (this issue) notes, Hardt and Negri's work is "crafted to incite as much as to identify the forces of liberation." Thus calling attention to writing, to the illocutionary force of the Hardt-Negri trilogy, raises the question, what is Hardt and Negri's theory of the production and role of radical theory itself?

The demographics of authorship matters in pointed ways to feminist critics. The fact that the authors belong to "particular status groups that have laid claim to the universal for so long" (Tsing, this issue)—that is, their race and gender—seems to inform their understanding of the multitude, suggest feminist anthropologists. A telling example is Hardt and Negri's portrait of the male wasp's sexual engagement with the orchid to capture the principle of radical relationships. Tsing asks, "Isn't it a bit too easy to use male sexual pleasure as the core experience of love?" Despite Hardt and Negri's insistence on a transnational political collective that does

not erase difference, through the concept of singularity, the anthropological respondents here find universalism in the concept of multitude. In Hardt and Negri's work, anthropologists find the "globally unifying multitude as the ultimate value" (Kelly, this issue) and "an enforced patina of preestablished common cause" (Tsing, this issue). Given inequality within the multitude, Tsing asks, "Who will be part of the 'we' that brings us into action?" She prefers to think through concrete coalitions, as when middle-class nature enthusiasts, peripheral indigenous groups, and nongovernmental organizations in Indonesia collaborated against logging operations (Tsing 1993). As she says in her contribution to this theme section, "[T]he closer you look, the more the common ground disappears." Yet, as her work suggests, misrecognition can enable, not only hinder, such coalitions.

In his previous work, Kelly has written about counterinsurgency in US military projects that anticipate insurgents and that are governed, he says, by "Mao fetishism" (Kelly 2010). Accordingly, Kelly is concerned by what he identifies as an orientation to violent insurrection in Hardt and Negri's work. The themes animating this vision of multitude, Kelly finds, are violent versions of subversion, sabotage, and insurgency. His article traces the philosophical underpinnings of their politic vision to Negri's engagements with Spinoza's differentiation among forms of power (*potestas* and *potentia*). The use of insurrection as a political thematic, Kelly says, is recklessly inattentive to the US military's anticipatory investments in violent unrest as the justification for Western aggression, particularly in the post-9/11 context of the war on terror. He suspects that violence is a political posture, "the invocation of intellectual radicalism by way of rebellion, sabotage, insurgency, and warfare imagery" (Kelly, this issue). For Kelly, Hardt and Negri transvalue immanent power (*potentia*) into an abstract, universal term. An ethnographic lens would not extrapolate from particular forms of immanent power to the political force of a global multitude, but would see it situated and delimited by its context.

## Textual preferences

The critiques here are predicated on ethnographers' desire to "show us a world caught in the historicity of conjunctures and contingencies" (Tsing, this issue). To analyze situatedness, they direct attention to alternative theoretical sources. Kelly resurrects the early twentieth-century theorist Veblen. Hardt and Negri, while echoing their predecessor, Kelly says, forget Veblen's insight that theories of sovereignty affect the actual operations of nations, a point resonant with Ong's critique that the radical theorists "view sovereignty exclusively in terms of its philosophical character" (Ong, this issue). Drawing on many of the same theoretical influences as Hardt and Negri do, Ong herself has advanced the concept of *assemblages* (Ong and Collier 2005) to recognize a contingent mix of resistances, accommodations, and manipulations that come together and go apart, to attend to the reorganization of factors in a context of flux.

Tsing (2005) has put forth *friction* as a model for the meeting of undeniably mobile phenomena (ideas, capital, etc.) with specific situations, a meeting characterized not by the predictive ideals of Newtonian physics but by the friction of the textured world. More recently, she has redeployed the capitalist category of "supply chains" (this issue). If one is going to borrow from corporate logic, Tsing's work suggests, supply chains provide a better way to think about progressive possibilities than the ideological differentiation between material and immaterial labor. Empirically, much of capitalism operates according to supply chains. Politically, the supply chain is "a system of links across difference" in nonunifying ways that express a simultaneous "archaic and futurist character" (Tsing, this issue). Sharing Hardt and Negri's orientation to identifying tendencies within economic realities, Tsing sees supply chains as "a structure of exploitation and a structure of possibility." Her ethnographic example of the ethnically segmented work of mushroom picking in Oregon public land for Japanese markets shows that particulars—for example, social identity—is essential to capitalist power and re-

sistance to it: "[N]iches are mobilized by gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, kin network, nationality, citizenship status, and other historically situated status markets." Ong's article confirms the significance of differentiated zones of national populations and national territory to neoliberal capitalism.

The anthropologists do not see their understanding of particularism, identity, and situation realized in the philosophers' concept of multitude. Even the concept of singularity, which Hardt and Negri employ to recognize diversity within a global multitude, does not satisfy the ethnographers. The anthropologists reject what they see as a comprehensive progress narrative in the Empire trilogy's historical account. The anthropologists stress heterogeneity and uncertainty. They prefer a conjunctural analysis, describing how the convergence of particular temporal events generates sets of potential outcomes. For them, the unevenness of global modernity—not a basic pattern—is its very character. As Tsing (this issue) says, global capitalism deploys supply chains in order to "make use of the ruins, cracks, and peripheries of modernization programs."

## Ethnography and possibility

"Analysis of objective conditions take us this far but no further." (Hardt and Negri 2009: 165)

What are the connections between critical anthropology and radical political philosophy in depicting our globalized world? To judge from the tenor of the anthropological responses here, the connections are rife with friction, with sparks generated not from spats about specificities but from deeper analytical, epistemological, and ontological conflicts.

Hardt and Negri incorporate attention to affect in their political vision, seeing affective labor as both exploited and political. In the spirit of attention to emotions (a crucial legacy particularly of feminist theory), it is worth reflecting on the affective nature of these critiques. The tone departs from ethnographic convention.

Writing that Hardt and Negri's theory is "too sure of itself" (Tsing, this issue) and "claims to be the DNA of our political world" (Ong, this issue), the authors appear to respond to what they experience as hubris on the part of the radical philosophers, their comfort in shouldering the mantle of grand panoramas of the world and leading the charge to recast history (a comfort traditionally allocated by race and gender). The intensity of these critiques, then, responds as much to the philosophers' self-assured style and vast scope as it does from the content of their arguments.

I was surprised by the consistent critique of the ambitions and claims of the trilogy, in works that, to my mind, shared epistemological orientations with the field. The trilogy's model of a *new* new left and its engagement with continental theory as well as queer and feminist theory all resonate with twenty-first-century versions of critical anthropology. Hardt and Negri's rendition of radical politics is predicated on critique of twentieth-century templates for left practice in light of theory and activism that values particularism, contingency, and forms of difference (what they call "singularity"). As Hardt argues in his comments at the end of this theme section, their account is neither teleological nor transcendent, but rather "a nonliberal theory of political pluralism." Why, then, do these anthropological readings find in this radical philosophy the very stances it disavows: teleology, totality, and transcendence? Given the obvious sympathies of Hardt and Negri's orientations to a critical ethnographic lens, why are these critiques so trenchant? In particular, the anthropological skepticism expressed here presents a puzzle: if Negri and Hardt present their project as eschewing the sins of previous left theories, why do these commentators find these proclivities still present? Because they do. They hear in the conceptions of multitude and empire another form of totalizing unity. They see the intellectual project an attempt to "renew structural Marxism" (Ong, this issue). Hardt and Negri write of "a world that has no outside" in order to insist that political agency emerges from the interior of this reality, not from a

source external to it (2009: vii). But following J. K. Gibson-Graham's arguments (1996), Tsing sees that portrait of an entirely capitalist world as a "hermetically sealed whole, with no outside" as a totality that obscures the recognition of plurality of economic forms or social identities (Tsing, this issue).

In his comments here, Michael Hardt counters this anthropological disagreement at the meta level, by casting the difference between his collaborative work and those of the ethnographers as a reflection of different modes of presentation. He rejects the notion that his collaborative project with Negri takes place in the ether of abstract thought, offering brief examples of grounded encounters to illustrate how he and Negri develop their thinking through situated receptivity to subjects and events, if not long-term ethnographic fieldwork proper. As he sees it, the difference between the kind of radical philosophy he does and ethnography centers on ends and means. Anthropology focuses on analyzing the *means* to ends, aiming to "reveal the apparatus of the collective production of meaning, truths, and subjectivities," (Hardt, this issue), while their radical theory is focused on the ends, a global vision created by the synthetic presentation of concepts, obstacles, and tendencies. Hardt and Negri and the anthropologists are not so different, Hardt suggests: they do not valorize different scales, or eschew either concrete or abstract modes. But they write differently.

Hardt's view from the high road bypasses the affective force of the critiques to emphasize the productive, friendly nature of the divergence relayed in these critical comments; as his title says, it is "[n]ot a contest of faculties." Yet by doing so, his response does not fully reckon with the particular challenges to his and Negri's arguments about state power, labor, difference, or insurrection. The diverging accounts of the new world order found in radical philosophy and critical anthropology surely erupt from disciplinary differences. One of these differences concerns writing, or what Hardt sees as the mode of presentation, which he understands as rooted in a different relationship to ends and means, but

which probably goes further. While anthropologists have for decades recognized their implicated positions in field sites and the vexed project of representing “others,” and increasingly see the need to recognize the presence of anthropology operating within our sites, we have less of a taste for inserting ourselves into a political trajectory (apart from self-described activist anthropologists). Hardt and Negri’s framework grants knowledge production a political role, including their own writing. They embrace the role of provocateur, writing to incite the multitude, to inspire an insurrection, an aspiration whose violent risks concern Kelly. The anthropological commentators clearly chafe at Hardt and Negri’s ambition as radical writers.

Hardt sees the anthropologists’ divergence from radical philosophy in terms of different relations to ends and means found in different modes of presentation. I cast the divergence in relation to available modalities of social analysis. One modality is to account for what has happened, and is happening, the empirical or descriptive dimension (which by no means implies a positivist, empiricist approach). Another is what will happen, the ways that current patterns are headed in particular directions, the predictive. Finally, there is the evaluative account of what should happen. The *Empire* trilogy combines descriptive, prescriptive, and normative accounts of human life in Euro-American modernity and in the current global context. It attends to the subjects of history, and in particular of European capitalism. Yet different takes on empirical, predictive, and normative dimensions result in different accounts of human life.

Description is the stock and trade of cultural anthropologists. Sometimes dismissed as “mere description,” critical anthropologists in fact emphasize a theoretically informed, postempiricist form of analytical description that not only represents but accounts for social realities. Marxist anthropologists, such as Eric Wolf and Eleanor Leacock, marshaled a wealth of empirical evidence to reveal a modern transnational history behind the timeless cultures that many observers attributed to Third-World or Fourth-World peoples. The second modality for

depicting social change is predictive accounts, a form taken by strands of positivist social science and radical political treatises, in rather different ways. For radical theory, the prediction might better be understood as mapping tendencies or emergent phenomena. Cultural anthropology engages little in plotting the future. The third form of portraiture, the normative or prescriptive, presents how the world *ought* to be. Normative theory is a staple of political discourses of all stripes.

While critical anthropologists and radical theorists share a motivating interest in counter-hegemonic theories of power, they clearly part ways. I am suggesting that much of the friction on display here reflects the different commitments to descriptive, predictive, and normative representations of the global world. The anthropological commitment to critical accounts of situated globality departs from the forward-looking panoramic view of radical philosophy. Such departures go beyond the potted sociological registers of micro and macro levels of analysis. As Kelly (this issue) suggests, the different interpretations have “much to do with why one chooses to be a philosopher or an ethnographer—where and how one expects to find important new truths.”

Anna Tsing (this issue), perhaps the closest of the quartet assembled here to being a fellow traveler of Hardt and Negri, writes that niche labor, in her case mushroom picking, might be a step toward the multitude, but only, she cautions, “if combined with a strategy of building transformative alliances and coalitions.” Her tantalizingly brief sketch of ongoing research on the interplay of mushroom pickers, state representatives, and community organizers is too preliminary to reveal any substantive form of such emerging coalitions. But her sympathetic work invites reflection on the analysis of potential or actual coalitions. Is this an empirical question of what coalitions actually exist, or is there room for theories of the conditions that generate them? Hardt and Negri attempt, mostly theoretically, to identify existing or at least potential directions found among those working under a biopolitical regime of empire.

Indeed, Hardt and Negri's bold outline of emergent global tendencies attracts some of the sharpest rebuke in these pages, described variously as prophecy (Kelly), apocalyptic (Ong), romantic (Kelly), fantasy (Yanagisako), dreams (Kelly), or dream world (Tsing). What unites such terms is the relationship to the future. For these anthropologists, Hardt and Negri's embrace of prediction signifies the hubris of this project, which in turn hinges on the philosophically driven form of their hopeful accounts of imminent directions that social life is taking. But it also points to the anthropologists' own temporality. Anna Tsing (this issue) says, "We can't predict; but we can throw our lot with radical possibilities." Can anthropologists, with their accumulated situated cases, identify emerging translocal politics of liberation beyond ephemeral coalitions? Does the ethnographic mode of knowledge hold the capacity for predictive and normative accounts of an assemblage or at the translocal scale?

There have long been simplistic divides between the evidentiary and theoretical, or description and analysis. The divide presented by this anthropological engagement with radical philosophy may echo, but in truth exceeds, the hack-neyed binaries of macro/micro analysis, global/local interactions, or data/theory, as Hardt himself notes in this issue. Rather, the encounter between the quartet of anthropologists and the radical theory duet is an encounter between different critical modalities of accounting for the social world. Such differences provoke questions for each moiety. What is the place of descriptions in radical theory and what is the place of predictive and normative theory for anthropology? What is the status of ethnography vis-à-vis theory? The cases of the mushroom supply chain, Italian family firms, or the adaptive Chinese state point to implications of field observations for the analysis of global power.

A question for political theorists then comes up: what is the relationship of the situated analysis of an empirical "case" to theories of the immanent and emergent? What verb to apply: does the ethnographic "case" complicate, illustrate, refashion, or delimit the globality of radi-

cal political theory? Michael Hardt is at pains in his response to affirm his commitment to an epistemology of grounded observations and he stresses that anthropologists and what are often called "local actors" are themselves authors of political theory. Thus, Hardt (this issue) proposes a causal and temporal relation between the situated material and global theory when he says that "our mode of inquiry involves 'low flying' theory and ... we too set out from concrete, local situations only to arrive later at a global vision." That is, infused with radical theory and politics, Hardt and Negri's thinking is relayed through the means of situated lives and action, which subsequently generates the ends of their global theory of power. While this response does not answer the anthropologists' specific arguments that the situated analysis of state power or forms of labor challenge the theories presented in the *Empire* trilogy, it does insist that Hardt and Negri's thought not only values, but has vitally depended on, low-flying and situated domains and the ongoing articulation of observations with theory and activism with philosophy.

The anthropological critique of this radical philosophy in turn raises questions for the ethnographers themselves: Is immanent analysis different from our analyses of situation? What is the relation of anthropology's commitments to the concrete—or the "situated," in Kelly's terms—to the normative and predictive accounts of transnational tendencies? Is there an anthropology of "possibilities"? Do our accounts allow us to offer depictions of tendencies that take something of a predictive form? Do our evidentiary accounts have any sense of futurity? As anthropologists here chafe at the confident ambition of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's radical political visions, we may reflect on the melancholia of our tragicomic interpretations, and wonder, are we denying ourselves a role in creating a radical future we might want to inhabit?

## Acknowledgments

This special section began as a panel at the 2010 American Anthropological Association meet-

ings, which included papers by Jeffrey Juris, John Kelly, Aihwa Ong, Sylvia Yanagisako, and a response from Michael Hardt, and which was sponsored by the American Ethnological Society, the Society for Cultural Anthropology, and the Association of Political and Legal Anthropology. Thanks are due to Chris Krupa, who solicited and aided the transformation into a thematic cluster; to Rizvana Bradley and Ali Altaf Mian for editorial assistance; to an anonymous reviewer for generous and spirited comments; and to Michael Hardt for so generously engaging the ethnographers' spirited critiques at the panel and in print.

---

Ara Wilson is associate professor of women's studies and cultural anthropology at Duke University, where she also directed the program in the study of sexualities. She is the author of *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the Global City* and is currently completing a book manuscript, *Sexual Latitudes: The Erotic Life of Globalization*. The topic of her new research project is medical tourism to Bangkok and Singapore.  
E-mail: ara.wilson@duke.edu

## Notes

1. An interdisciplinary set of essays about Hardt and Negri's first volume, *Empire's New Clothes*, includes the feminist critique of Lee Quinby and a queer reading by anthropologist Bill Maurer, among other contributions (Passavant and Dean 2004). William S. Wilson (2005) writes about art, religion, and the theory of negation in their work.
2. The range of ethnographic studies that resonate with the themes of *Multitude* is far too numerous to list here. An example of an ethnography that has explicit sympathies with Hardt and Negri's project is Juris (2008).
3. I am using immanent critique here in a loosely Marxist sense, as identifying contradictions or directions that are located within what could be called a system. John Kelly's article in this issue discusses the specific philosophical dimensions of Negri and Spinoza's use of immanence.

## References

- Gibson-Graham, J. K. 1996. *The end of capitalism (as we knew it): A feminist critique of political economy*. London: Blackwell.
- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. 2000. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. 2004. *Multitude: War and democracy in the age of empire*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. 2009. *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Juris, Jeffrey S. 2008. *Networking futures: The movements against corporate globalization*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kelly, John. 2010. Seeing red: Mao fetishism, pax Americana and the moral economy of war. In John D. Kelly, Beatrice Jauregui, Sean T. Mitchell, and Jeremy Walton, eds., *Anthropology and Global Counterinsurgency*, pp. 67–83. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ong, Aihwa. 1987. *Spirits of resistance and capitalist discipline: Factory women in Malaysia*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Ong, Aihwa. 2006. *Neoliberalism as exception: Mutations in citizenship and sovereignty*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ong, Aihwa, and Nancy N. Chen. 2010. *Asian biotech: Ethics and communities of fate*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ong, Aihwa, and Stephen J. Collier, eds. 2005. *Global assemblages: Technology, politics, and ethics as anthropological problems*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Passavant, Paul, and Jodi Dean. 2004. *Empire's new clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri*. New York: Routledge.
- Scott, David. 2004. *Conscripts of modernity: The tragedy of colonial enlightenment*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 1993. *In the realm of the diamond queen*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2005. *Friction: An ethnography of global connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Wilson, William S. 2005. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri: Irreducible innovation. *Electronic Book Review*. 18 December. <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/endconstruction/lateral>.
- Yanagisako, Sylvia. 2002. *Culture and capital: Producing Italian family capitalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.