

Empire & Eschaton

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One thing's for certain: time is moving *forward*. Decisive and irreversible changes take place in history, and attempting to go back is not only naïve, but inevitably disastrous. Yet there is no predefined goal, no "process" that will definitively redeem all past stages. Such, at least, is the burden of Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, written between the first Gulf War and the Kosovo intervention in an attempt to reformulate the leftist project in the face of rapid changes in the structure of sovereignty and production. In a daring reappropriation of the rhetoric of the New Economy and the political Third Way, Hardt and Negri argue that the most significant trends of the 1990s - the informatization of production, the claim that "the era of big government is over," the breakdown of institutions - are coming together to create a situation of unprecedented emancipatory potential.

Yet at the same time that they assert that every day, in every way, the multitude is getting better and better, they disavow the teleological view of history that has been a consistent temptation for the Marxist tradition:

"We are not proposing the umpteenth version of the inevitable passage through purgatory (here in the guise of the new imperial machine) in order to offer a glimmer of hope for radiant futures. We are not repeating the schema of an ideal teleology that justifies any passage in the name of a promised end."¹

The extreme optimism of *Empire*, the conviction that here, finally, the multitude

has been provided with the tools to rise up on a global level - this is not a teleological claim, but a *rhetorical strategy*. Hardt and Negri are, above all, motivational speakers, and motivational speakers may be exactly what we need.

We live in an era when the left, by its own admission, is on the brink of death, barely able to summon up enough energy for revolutionary literary criticism and emancipatory film theory. In the wake of the collapse of Real Socialism, the task of the leftist political theorist has been not simply to develop the existing tradition or apply that tradition to contemporary situations, but to find new theoretical foundations for the leftist political project itself. For example, in *The Ticklish Subject*, Slavoj Žižek, fully aware of this deadlock, wishes to stage "an engaged political intervention, addressing the burning question of how we are to reformulate a leftist, anti-capitalist political project in our era of global capitalism and its ideological supplement, liberal-democratic multi-culturalism."² After nearly four hundred pages of theoretical critiques and amusing asides, he concludes with a bit of Lacanian psychoanalysis, claiming that "Lacan's maxim, 'Do not compromise your desire!' fully endorses the pragmatic paradox of ordering you to be free: it exhorts you to dare."³ In casting about for examples of those who took up that exhortation to dare, Žižek finally settles on Lenin and the apostle Paul.

For the latter, Žižek is drawing on Alain Badiou's account of the apostle, who is for him "a subjective figure of primary significance."⁴ His purpose is not to reactivate Christianity, but rather to help in the

"widespread search for a new militant figure - even if it takes the form of denying its possibility - called upon to succeed the one installed by Lenin and the Bolsheviks at the beginning of the century, which can be said to have been the party militant. When a step forward is the order of the day, one may, among other things, find assistance in the greatest step back. Whence this reactivation of Paul. I am not the first to risk the

comparison that makes of him a Lenin for whom Christ will have been the equivocal Marx.”⁵

Badiou’s account of the ways in which Paul is our contemporary is similar to Hardt and Negri’s continual, almost involuntary, references back to the Roman Empire (similar to the irresistible parallels to the contemporary scene among the scholars of “Paul and Empire”) - time may be moving forward, but it’s not out of the question for patterns to repeat themselves. If, as Hardt and Negri claim, the only possibility for revolution today is “an absolute alternative to the spirit of imperial right... within Empire, but also against and beyond Empire, at the same level of totality,”⁶ then why not look back to Paul? Paul was, after all, the one who rejected the reactionary impulse of merely preserving Jewish identity as a stop-gap against Empire, and instead saw in Christ an event of universal significance, an event that, in principle, included every person of every nation and that must be spread throughout the entire Empire - a counter-community of resistance, “at the same level of totality.”

For Paul, the promised redemption has already happened; the resurrection has guaranteed the victory of Christ’s body, the church. The promised Messiah has already come, and precisely for that reason *will* come - we can and do in fact participate in his coming Kingdom here and now. Hardt and Negri provide a seeming parallel in their insistence on the “always-already” of the revolutionary power of the seething multitude:

“Don’t the necessary weapons reside precisely within the creative and prophetic power of the multitude? ... Don’t we already possess ‘arms’ and ‘money’? The kind of money that Machiavelli insists is necessary [for revolution] may in fact reside in the productivity of the multitude, the immediate actor of biopolitical production and reproduction. The kind of arms in question may be contained in the potential of the multitude to sabotage and destroy with its

own productive force the parasitical order of postmodern command.”⁷

Hardt and Negri’s “realized eschatology,” however, is far too “realized” and not nearly “eschatological” enough - “resistance is actually prior to power.”⁸ In their libertarian railing against the state, Hardt and Negri show themselves to be nostalgic for a Romantic, pre-civilized “natural man,” to wish to go back to the garden rather than strictly forward to the Kingdom.

This is not to undercut the value of their analysis of the contemporary political and economic system: when, for example, Simon Critchley recently echoed many of Hardt and Negri’s critics by saying, “It is rare for books to be refuted empirically, but I think this happened to *Empire* on September 11th, 2001,”⁹ he seemed to be strangely missing the point. In point of fact, the events since September 11 can be read as *supporting* their thesis. The war in Afghanistan was viewed as legitimate, largely due to its international imprimatur, while the war in Iraq, an assertion of crass nationalism, prompted massive worldwide protests. In itself, the self-assertion of the United States is simply not enough to “disprove” Hardt and Negri’s argument that a new form of sovereignty is taking shape. The very illegitimacy of such action in the eyes of most of the world, and the manifest failure of straight nationalist foreign policy lend plausibility to the idea that Empire was called into being by a multitude that has grown tired of the horrors of nationalism.

At the same time, Hardt and Negri’s hands-off approach to the exigencies of concrete political action does seem particularly inadequate in the light of the supremely nihilistic gesture of September 11. Their particular brand of Deleuzianism suffers from the same flaw as so many vitalistic philosophies: they have no answer to the question of how the unambiguously good productive energies of the multitude ended up producing such a long succession of terrible situations. Their “official” rejection of a naïve teleology, in the form of the standard portrait of Hegel whereby

everything will always work out in the end, is unconvincing insofar as they continue to rely on Hegelian thought patterns throughout. It is unclear how else are we to make sense of their basic contention that

“the construction of Empire is good *in itself* but not *for itself*... [it is] a step forward in order to do away with any nostalgia for the power structures that preceded it and refuse any political strategy that involves returning to that old arrangement, such as trying to resurrect the nation-state to protect against global capital.”¹⁰

In light of the rejection of the dialectic, it is also unclear how one is to understand Empire or any previous form of power as “parasitical” on the multitude,¹¹ since its only possible source is the productive energy of the multitude.

Put in theological terms, the problem with Hardt and Negri, in short, is that their inadequate doctrine of original sin undercuts their realized eschatology. They should know better than to trust the “spontaneous” actions of the multitude, since it is always already too late for “spontaneous” actions to take place. The disciplinary formation of subjectivity has in fact always already happened, and there is no going back. Lacanian psychoanalysis understands the human being as constitutively misshapen by the very process of entering the linguistic space of human interaction. Rather than longing for the impossible pre-linguistic experience that Deleuze and Guattari glorify under the name of a “schizophrenia,” psychoanalysis seeks to reshape the subject’s relationship to the symbolic order, the social substance, to turn the constitutive division in the subject into an opportunity rather than a burden. As Žižek says in his recent book on Deleuze, *Organs Without Bodies*:

“Is the Freudian Oedipus complex (especially in terms of its Lacanian interpretive appropriation) not the exact *opposite* of the reduction of the multitude of social intensities onto the mother-father-and-me matrix: the matrix of the explosive

opening up of the subject onto the social space? Undergoing “symbolic castration” is a way for the subject to be thrown out of the family network, propelled into a wider social network....”¹²

While he is admittedly overstating his case for polemical reasons (the Oedipus complex *is* initially the means of constraining the subject within the daddy-mommy-me matrix), Žižek here hits on the liberatory dynamic underlying psychoanalysis - a dynamic thoroughly homologous to that which allows the church to say *O felix culpa*... in the Easter Vigil.

The key to effective liberatory political action is thus not nostalgia for the impossible pre-linguistic experience, the impossible “opting out” of original sin, but rather for redemption, for *post*-linguistic experience, the concrete way to be “in the world, but not of the world.” The refusal of discipline is the unwitting submission to the consumerist discipline of Empire; the challenge is to find the *concrete practice* of liberation. Even if Christianity always runs the risk of becoming a tool of Empire, even if empirical Christianity achieved little more than granting us “Empire with a human face,” the Christian tradition offers us valuable resources for formulating such a practice, not through the hopeless Leninist quest of overthrowing it, but rather through concrete counter-imperial practice in the present. The essays in Richard Horsley’s *Paul and Empire* and *Paul and Politics* make a convincing case that Paul offers “both an alternative constitution or form of government and an alternative emperor for an alternative society.”¹³ The parallels between the all-subsuming cult of the emperor and the rampant consumerism of Christmas alone provide sufficient grounds for reappropriating Paul for today’s circumstances.¹⁴

The project becomes one of reading the New Testament as a collection of strategies for the formation of liberatory counter-communities. Professor Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., provides a model for such a reading in his *Insurrection of the Crucified*,

which outlines, among other things, how Mark the evangelist developed the strategy of martyrdom as a way of shoring up the nascent church after the decapitation of its leadership. Similarly, we might read the authentic letters of Paul as illustrating the strategy of hijacking the language of Empire and forming counter-imperial “cells” throughout the Empire, or the Pastorals as illustrating the strategy of becoming “more Roman than the Romans.” We may very well be able to reuse some of the biblical strategies, but we also need to face the possibility that *none* of those strategies are available to us any longer. Hardt and Negri vividly illustrate the dangers of hijacking imperial language: by repeating the slogans and rhetorical moves of the 1990s business elite, so thoroughly documented in Thomas Frank’s *One Market Under God*, Hardt and Negri run the risk of being reappropriated as “ideologist[s] of late capitalism.”¹⁵ Clearly the Pastoral approach has shown itself to be an utter failure in the case of what could be termed generic “church growth”-style Evangelical Republicanism, and it is difficult (for me at least) to imagine a situation in which a martyrdom would register as such in a society where punishment and execution have been so thoroughly removed from public view. The church, or a subsection of the church like the early Methodist societies, may have to develop entirely new strategies or borrow strategies from sources outside of, or even opposed to, the church.

If there is a scripture for our time, it is the parable of the dishonest manager. Although (or perhaps because) it usually baffles readers and preachers alike, I have long thought of it as a key to the gospel as a whole:

“Then Jesus said to the disciples, ‘There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my

master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. ‘Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?’” (Luke 16.1-12)

There are several points about the story that have always caught my eye. First, the manager does not completely eliminate the debts of his master’s clients. Instead he gives them a discount -enough to make a difference to the clients, but probably not so much that the master will go out of his way to demand the whole amount. It is a realistic strategy, sustainable in the short- to medium-term. Second, when Jesus gives us the moral of the story, he says, “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into eternal homes” (16.9). The example of this unprincipled principle is a man who makes friends for himself using someone else’s money. In the Roman world as in our world, however, there is no wealth other than dishonest wealth, no wealth that doesn’t stem from “primitive accumulation” - or, more bluntly, from outright theft - somewhere along the

line. Third, Jesus challenges the very notion of what it means to make good use of resources. “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?” (Luke 16.10-11) Again, the example of this principle is someone who has been dishonest by the standards of the world, which deploys ideological fictions in order to make sure that wealth is concentrated in only a few “deserving” hands: as Marx says, “Accumulate, accumulate! This is Moses and the Prophets.”¹⁶

True honesty and faithfulness in the use of dishonest wealth consists in using it precisely to *make friends*. The theme of friendship recurs throughout the gospel traditions. Jesus’ enemies use it as a reproach: “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” (Matthew 11.19 and Luke 7.34) In a strange example, just as he is being betrayed, “Jesus said to [Judas], ‘Friend, do what you are here to do’” (Matthew 26.50) Perhaps the best-known reference to friendship, however, occurs in the Gospel of John:

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.” (John 15.13-15)

In addition, nearly all the authors of the New Testament epistles refer to their audience as friends. As Derrida illustrates in his *Politics of Friendship*, the concept of “friend” is by no means unambiguous, tied up as it is with ideas of love, fraternity, memory, death, the secret, and community. An analysis for the church would have to pick up where Derrida left off, engaging in a more detailed reading

of the New Testament texts to which he simply alludes and asking after the resonances that “friendship” evokes throughout the Western tradition of which Christianity is a part. What does it mean, for example, that Jesus most emphatically designates his disciples as friends in the very gospel that pointedly *omits* an account of Jesus’ command to “do this in memory of me,” in stark contrast to the Ciceronian concept of the friend as the one who delivers the best eulogy? What does it mean when Jesus breaks out of the strictly fraternal metaphor for friendship by designating his community of friends as “my brother and sister and mother?” (Mark 3.35) In what sense might the community Jesus gathers be a “community of those without community?”¹⁷

In what sense might the gospels themselves, together with Paul’s universalistic mission, already be engaging in a deconstructive reading of the concept of friendship, and along with them, family and community? Derrida admits at the end of his study his aversion to the concepts of brotherhood and especially community. Commenting on a passage in which Blanchot claims that due to their persecution under the Nazis, “*the Jews were our brothers*,” he asks:

“Reading this sentence... I was wondering, among other questions...: why could I never have written that, nor subscribed to it...? In the same vein, I was wondering why the word ‘community’ (avowable or unavowable, inoperative or not - why I have never been able to write it, on my own initiative and in my name, as it were? Why? Whence my reticence?”¹⁸

One might wish that contemporary theology would show some of the same reticence, investigating more closely what Christians are saying when they say “community”: what it means in a world in which so many Christian communities define themselves by their enemies (viz. generic “church-growth” style Evangelical Republicanism); what it means to say it in a world in which every

new subdivision styles itself a “community” suitable for the nurturing of families and in which so many such “communities” are gated.

If the kingdom of God really is at hand, we frankly might not have time to build communities - we may well be in an emergency situation in which we only have time to use our dishonest wealth to make friends. In our age, which has accumulated an unprecedented degree of dishonest wealth, the program of using it to make friends may need to take a form similar to Hardt and Negri’s three goals for the multitude, and it may well need to use the dishonest wealth of the old, obsolete nation-state, without nostalgia and without idealism. It may need to take the form of tireless advocacy of those friends who will never join the empirical church, calling into question the stark boundaries that many Christians see between the church and the world and letting go of the ultimately nihilistic concern for preserving Christian identity above all else. Above all, honesty and faithfulness in the use of dishonest wealth must be unprincipled, even, if necessary, to the point of working in and with the empirical church.

Notes

1. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000), 47.
2. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 2000), 4.
3. Ibid. 392.
4. Ibid. 1.
5. Ibid. 2.
6. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 21.
7. Ibid. 65-66.
8. Ibid. 360.
9. Simon Critchley, “The Problem of Hegemony,” *Political Theory Daily Review* (7 May 2004, 9 May 2004), <<http://www.politicaltheory.info/essays/critchley.htm>>.
10. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 42-43.
11. Ibid. 66.
12. Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 83.

13. Richard Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1997), 211.
14. Ibid. 21.
15. Žižek, *Organs*, 184.
16. Qtd. in Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 32.
17. Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins, (New York: Verso, 1997), 37.
18. Ibid. 304-305.