

Plundering the Empire: Globalization, Mediation, and Cultural Studies

Imre Szeman

What is the point of selling your soul
When there's nothing to buy
And nowhere to go?

—The The

Beneath the belief in unspoiled nature and the rhetoric of total industrial collapse is a no less urgent desire to be part of something larger than oneself—the same desire that motivates consumers to drink Starbucks coffee and wear Nikes.

—David Samuels, “Notes from Underground”

In April 2000, several of my students traveled to Washington to join the protests against the policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This was a particularly savvy group of young adults, politically astute and well versed in critical and media theory, if perhaps not all that experienced in social protest or political activism. They went armed with digital video cameras and audio decks so that they could bottle the enthusiasm of the protesters and bring it back north to Canada to share with their colleagues. The cameras and audio equipment—which were ubiquitous at the demonstration, everybody filming everyone else as in one of Atom Egoyan's early films—served another purpose as well. My students wanted to bear witness to the increasingly evident brutality of the modern Western state which, in contravention of its own constitutional and legal guarantees regarding free speech

and public protests, had already been displayed to the world in Vancouver at the APEC Summit in 1997 and in Seattle during the World Trade Organization meetings in November 1999.¹ It was a life-altering experience for all of them. The exuberance and hope described by so many of those who participated in Seattle and Washington were felt deeply by my own students (see, for example, St. Clair 1999). They returned to campus with renewed vigor and fresh energy and, above all else, with a strong sense that politics *is* still possible, even if everything and everyone has told them that is not the case—or at least not anymore, not in the face of the relentless energy of contemporary global capital and its eager-to-please free-enterprise minions in governments around the world.

I have to admit: I was probably one of these naysayers—one of those who, perhaps inadvertently, reinforced this dire view of contemporary politics in the minds of my students. Many of the students who went to Washington took both the classes that I offered that term: one in modern critical theory, the other, on television and cultural studies. In the theory course, we read a typical mix of essays by a variety pack of twentieth-century thinkers, from Freud to Foucault, from Adorno to Said. If anything held this course together, it was my insistence on the power and necessity of negative critique. I wanted to show them there was an enormous amount to be gained from attacking all positive claims about the nature of man, the character of reality, and the seemingly unassailable lie of the everyday—those ordinary, “natural” circuits of experience and desire within which we live and work that hide the exclusions and violence through which they are constituted. To put it more bluntly, I taught them good old-fashioned ideology critique, while also teaching them to be vigilant about this practice as well, since I certainly didn’t want to transform theory into a new Queen of the Sciences, imperiously able to identify the gaps and weaknesses of every other practice and position. Thus, negative critique, bolstered by negative critique of negative critique. It was gratifying to hear so many of my students express their thanks for helping them to see through the official stories of the century—political, philosophical, and otherwise. It was less gratifying to hear that so many of them were left despondent, politically paralyzed, unable to see a way forward from where we had ended.

The orientation of my course on television was pretty much the same: to search out and destroy all mythologies, both about the medium and those perpetuated by it. This proved to be much easier with television than it was, say, with the presumptions of the Enlightenment or the problems with modernization and development theory. Pierre Bourdieu, whose *On Television* (1998) was the first book that we looked at, has it right. Television is one of those things that everyone wishes was different,

1. Though a far less well-known event, the protests against the meeting of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in November 1997 marked the first instance of mass public protest against the meeting of an international body as a response to some of the phenomena associated with globalization. It also marked the return of a very violent response to public protest on the part of the authorities, at least within the G-7 nations. For a thorough treatment of the APEC protests, see Pue (2000). For an account of the most recent clash between protesters and police in Canada, see Luciw and Freeze (2000).

that nobody likes in its current form. There was thus no need to compel my students to criticize television: it comes prepackaged as something to be critical of, even though such criticism doesn't impede its effectivity. As everyone knows, criticizing television is easy; doing so in Canada, where one can add to concerns about racial and gender representations realized fears about U.S. cultural imperialism in the shape of our national televisual landscape, is even easier. And so a general feeling of doom and gloom abounded in this class as well: stunned agreement after reading Edward Herman and Robert McChesney's *The Global Media* (1998), a complete loss of faith in Canadian particularity after looking through David Taras's *Power and Betrayal in the Canadian Media* (1998), and so on. What could be done about television, about this medium that "offers, theoretically, the possibility of reaching everybody" (Bourdieu 1998, 14) but which never comes close to actualizing its democratic possibilities? The answer seemed to be "nothing," and I didn't do anything to discourage my students from thinking so. Once again, critique seemed to produce despair, and I began to wonder what my classes were missing and why they seemed unable to give my students the resources to hope.

I was thinking about these two courses and my students' reactions to them the whole time that I was reading through Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000). In this enormously enterprising work, Hardt and Negri offer nothing less than a magisterial overview of the development of capitalist modernity that is at once philosophically sophisticated and alive with historical detail. Beginning with Marx himself, the development of capitalism through its successive stages is a narrative that has been told many times. One can safely say, however, that it has never been told before in quite this way.² Hardt and Negri have produced a genuinely materialist history of capitalism's development that synthesizes the work of Marx and Marxists with thinkers like Spinoza and Machiavelli, Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari. Their overall aim is to get us fundamentally to rethink our understanding of how we came to be where we are and what might be done about it. Put more concretely, *Empire* is a book about what has come to be called "globalization," but, importantly, one that studiously and deliberately avoids focusing on this term itself. By using a substitute term for the phenomena associated with globalization—the term "Empire" itself—what Hardt and Negri suggest is that for all the copious amount of ink that has been spilled over the past decade in pursuit of the complex logic(s) of globalization, we've still got it all wrong. Theorists of globalization may have attentively mapped out the material and epistemological shifts of the twentieth century, but they've done so in an antiquated vocabulary that hasn't really managed to tell us any more about globalization than that things are getting faster and the world is getting smaller.³ What Hardt and Negri offer us thus amounts to a counterhistory, an alter-

2. Except, that is, in Hardt and Negri's *Labor of Dionysus* (1994), which introduces many of the themes of *Empire*, though in a less systematic way.

3. In some of its best-known formulations, globalization has been characterized as "the intensification of world-wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away" (Giddens 1990, 64), as "time-space compression" (Harvey 1992,

native genealogy of the development of capitalism from its beginnings up to the present, that gives us a more profound understanding of where we are and especially of what is possible and what the future might hold.

While *Empire* doesn't directly deal with issues of pedagogy or with the subject matter of my classes—which might be understood broadly as two courses in cultural studies, one more focused on theory than the other—the critical energy that animates *Empire* seems to me to hold important lessons for how we understand the task of cultural studies today and how we might introduce students to the tradition of theoretical critique at the beginning of this century. Timothy Brennan has suggested that “cultural studies” should be “the name applied to any inquiry freed from the radical division of intellectual labor” (1997, 229) that characterizes the modern university; in this way, cultural studies, whatever specific subject matter it addresses, always constitutes “a protest against technocratic specialization” (229) that produces certain kinds of knowledge at the expense of others. This is probably a general enough way of framing the task of cultural studies so as to make it impossible to dismiss it out of hand for its failure to accomplish whatever goals it might have set for itself. Still, if there has been one overarching problem with cultural studies in North America—a practice that has most commonly been associated with the examination of popular and mass culture—it has been, as Brennan also points out, that “its practitioners cannot distinguish between the market sense of popularity . . . and a rather different utopian longing for a new consciousness, collective, wholistic, and opposed to empire” (231). As I was reading *Empire*, it struck me that the problems that I experienced in my classes and this problem of cultural studies were related in unexpected ways: the political limits of negative critique, exposed in my classes as a kind of knowledge that generates the opposite of what might one expect—despair rather than hope; and the inability of cultural studies to grasp the true dimensions of the “popular,” with the result being that its vaunted counterdisciplinarity has mostly generated suspicion or cynicism about its claims regarding the popular.⁴ It also seemed to me that in *Empire*, Hardt and Negri offer a way of repositioning these problems in a productive (if uncomfortable) way that forces us to rethink both the nature of the popular and the character of the contemporary situation to which critique must respond.

As a way of offering a response to Hardt and Negri's book, what I'd like to do here is to offer a sketch (the outlines only, with all the important details to be filled in later) of what globalization understood as *Empire* might mean for a cultural studies that wants to engage with the global present in a serious way. It has been clear for some time that globalization means that cultural studies cannot conduct business as usual. For instance, as numerous commentators have suggested, for all its other contributions to our understanding of contemporary culture, cultural studies has retained a fairly traditional

147), as “the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life, from the cultural to the criminal, the financial to the spiritual” (Held et al. 1999, 2), and as “the compression of the world and the intensification of the consciousness of the world as a whole” (Robertson 1992, 8).

4. See Meaghan Morris's seminal “Banality in Cultural Studies” (1990) for an elaboration of this point.

understanding of the link between culture and space, a link that globalization challenges (Ang and Stratton 1996; Grossberg 1996, 1999; Lott 1996; Wald 1998).⁵ How to study culture and cultural forms outside an appeal to space—a space in which one could, finally, locate the source, the ground zero of the symptom that is culture—poses a significant problem that has yet to be thoroughly grappled with. If *Empire* offers a productive site at which one might think about cultural studies and globalization, it is not because it provides us with all the answers that we have been looking for. Indeed, one of the things that Hardt and Negri fail to think about fully enough, it seems to me, is in fact one of the typical thematic concerns of cultural studies: the way in which popular and mass culture produced within and by what they call “Empire,” suppresses or shapes the desires of the “multitude” that they see as so important to bringing about the transformation or the end of Empire. Phenomenologically, what is confusing and uncertain about the experience of mass-produced and mediated culture is that it blurs our sense of the difference between what Brennan (1997) calls the “market sense of popularity” and the “utopian longing for a new consciousness.” Once mass culture becomes globalized, the border between these two modes of the popular become even more difficult to patrol as it is just that space outside the market (whether fantasized or real) that encouraged utopian dreams, that has disappeared into the “spatial totality” (Hardt and Negri 2000, xiv) of Empire. At the same time, this is just where *Empire* offers significant conceptual tools for a global cultural studies. In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri manage to get us beyond the dichotomous inside/outside politics that has long animated both theory and practice. In so doing, they provide a potential theoretical resource for charting the reality of utopian desire within a system that *is* total—a system in which, as one of the epigraphs that begins this paper suggests, consumer longings are indissociable from the longing for primeval nature or genuine community.

Death to Mediation, Long Live Empire!

Knowing is giving oneself over to a phenomenon rather than thinking about it from above.

—Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System*

Three key conceptual nodes emerge in *Empire* that require us to rethink our understanding of globalization, the politics appropriate to it, and subsequently, our understanding of the work performed by cultural studies within globalization: (1) the shift

5. After all, cultural studies as a field begins not with a rejection of the nation as an appropriate “field” of study (think of the national cultural histories written by E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, and Richard Hoggart), but with a complication of the national field through the introduction of the serious study of popular and mass culture. Given the themes of some of the recent annual conferences of the American Studies Association (“Global Migrations, American Cultures” [1996], “Crossing Borders, Crossing Centuries” [1999], and “The World in American Studies/American Studies in the World” [2000]), it is clear that a general rethinking of the relationship of culture to space is occurring in any number of disciplinary frameworks.

from a disciplinary society to a society of control (a shift that Deleuze excavates from the work of Michel Foucault); (2) the end of mediation, as the conceptual blockage of transcendence is overcome in the current phase of capitalism to produce a (conceptual/theoretical/empirical) plane of pure immanence; and (3) the vision of the multitude as the true agents of history as opposed to being its passive victims. It is difficult to separate the fashioning of these concepts out of the larger argument that Hardt and Negri make regarding the creation of the new form of sovereignty and new regime of production that makes Empire—"the political subject that effectively regulates . . . global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world" (2000, xi)—an entirely unprecedented capitalist formation. However, for the sake of space, I will nevertheless focus mainly on these three clusters of concepts in order to consider just what it means to understand Empire as that form of capitalism that has overcome its *outside*.

In contrast to those who want to see globalization as the latest moment of a very long process of capitalist development, Hardt and Negri insist that the present moment of capitalism is of a fundamentally different character than even the recent past. Following Deleuze's reading of Foucault, they claim that there has been a shift from a disciplinary society to a society of control in which command is articulated biopolitically—that is, from the *inside* rather than the *outside*. In the first phase of capitalist accumulation, which extended up to and through modernity, control was exercised over the social by means of various apparatuses that produced and managed practices, customs, and habits. This is the terrain of the early Foucault who analyzed the way in which disciplines and institutions—the hospital, the prison, the asylum—produced and prescribed regimes of normality and deviance, inclusion and exclusion.⁶ However, beginning in late modernity and extending into postmodernity (the exact moment is unclear), mechanisms of command become "ever more 'democratic,' ever more immanent to the social field, distributed through the brains and bodies of the citizens. The behaviors of social integration and exclusion proper to rule are thus increasingly interiorized within the subjects themselves" (23). For Hardt and Negri, the contemporary exercise of power is distinguished by the fact that that it occurs everywhere: it extends across "the entirety of social relations" (24), traversing the social and penetrating to places that could never previously have been imagined. The consequences of this are far-reaching: "The great industrial and financial powers thus produce not only commodities but also subjectivities. They produce agentic subjectivities within the biopolitical context: they produce needs, social relations, bodies, and minds—which is to say, they produce producers" (32).

The shift from a disciplinary society to a society of control is part of what can be seen as a more general process governing the development of capitalism. Hardt and

6. Even in Foucault's examination of the disciplinary function of modern institutions, the shift toward biopolitics and self-regulation is repeatedly emphasized. For example, in his discussion of Samuel Tuke in *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault writes that in Tuke's asylum "the assignment of guilt is no longer the mode of relation that obtains between the madman and the sane man in their generality; it becomes both the concrete form of coexistence of each madman with his keeper, and *the form of awareness that the madman must have of his own madness*" (1984, 145; my emphasis).

Negri define Empire as “characterized fundamentally by a lack of boundaries . . . the concept of Empire posits a regime that effectively encompasses the spatial totality, or really that rules over the entire ‘civilized’ world” (xiv). What enables this dissolution of boundaries is the end of virtually all processes and forms of *mediation*. While the birth of Empire is traced out by Hardt and Negri along several axes, all these return to the question of what happens to mediation—the way in which, through a long historical process, transcendence becomes immanence and inside and outside collapse into a single plane traversed by power and resistance simultaneously. For example, the second section of the book, “Passages to Sovereignty,” traces out three moments in the production of the modern concept of sovereignty. Modernity, they suggest, is born out of the discovery of a “revolutionary plane of immanence” (70). In the early modern period, humanity reappropriates the powers of being and creation that were previously considered to belong to the heavens; knowledge and power come down to earth, and human beings became agents of their own fate. Or at least they potentially do so. The previously constituted powers—the aristocracy, the clergy—drew their power from their status as agents of transcendence, mediators between heavenly order and worldly disorder. Unwilling to give up social power and political control, they fought a rearguard action. In an extremely provocative way, Hardt and Negri characterize the ensuing five centuries of European history (from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment to imperialism and globalization) as a civil war of competing modernities: “a transcendent constituted power against an immanent constituent power, order against desire” (74).

In the Enlightenment, the crisis introduced by the revolution of immanence was addressed by the constituted powers through a reintroduction of mechanisms of mediation into every aspect of social life. “It was paramount,” Hardt and Negri write, “to avoid the multitude’s being understood, à la Spinoza, in a direct, immediate relation with divinity and nature, as the ethical producer of life and the world. On the contrary, in every case mediation had to be imposed on the complexity of human relations” (78). The great philosophical systems from Descartes to Kant can be seen as ways of reintroducing transcendence even while proclaiming to establish the grounds of humanistic knowledge. In these (in a sense) “counter-modern” philosophies, reality is pushed repeatedly beyond human apprehension and the subject is transformed into one that is perpetually in crisis, always uncertain and destabilized with respect to the real. The order of transcendence is also reintroduced in the Hobbesian and Rousseauist concepts of political sovereignty, a relationship of subjects to a transcendental sovereignty realized in the end most fully in the concept of the nation. For Hardt and Negri, the nation has a two-fold function in the war of transcendence on immanence. First, it “completes the notion of sovereignty by claiming to precede it” (102). This manages effectively to overcome the precariousness of modern sovereignty by transforming the relationship of the multitude to the sovereign into a relationship of citizens to an eternal, naturally given *thing*, the overall effect being to suppress any and all social antagonisms by suppressing knowledge of the historical and social construction of the political order. Second, the nation trans-

forms the “multitude” into the “people.” This distinction is an essential one for Hardt and Negri and runs throughout *Empire*. The multitude is described as “a multiplicity, a plane of singularities, an open set of relations, which is not homogenous or identical with itself and bears an indistinct, inclusive relation to those outside of it. The people, in contrast, tends toward identity and homogeneity internally while posing its difference from and excluding what remains outside of it” (103). In essence, then, these various systems of mediation—political, philosophical, national—have functioned historically as a way of denying the possibilities first opened up the discovery of the revolutionary plan of immanence; the concept and necessity of mediation maintained power in the hands of the mediators and provided capitalism a fertile ground in which to develop.

The relationship between inside and outside, and the need for a transcendent political ontology, has thus been essential to the operation of capitalism. The initial recognition of humanity’s power that launched the modern era is the source of capitalism’s productive powers; however, unfettered immanence, the absence of a belief in the necessity of a given social order or in the transcendence of economic laws (for example), would lead to a wholesale challenge to capitalism. In *Empire*, capitalism is thus depicted as having to anxiously patrol and manage this interplay of immanence and transcendence. For Hardt and Negri, the shift in capitalism that has been identified as globalization marks a resolution of this crisis-plagued border game: capitalism has ended its reliance on and relationship with transcendence and has itself become immanent. This is *Empire*: capitalism in which “the modern dialectic of inside and outside has been replaced by a play of degrees and intensities, of hybridity and artificiality” (187–8). Though the intervention of the state—a machine of transcendence—has been important in the historical development of capitalism, what this obscured is the way in which (as Marx well knew) capitalism has always been “detritorializing and immanent,” seeking to separate people from “specifically coded territories,” linking all forms of value together through money, and operating via “historically variable laws that are immanent to the very functioning of capital” (326) rather than given from above. For a number of reasons, however, capitalism was able to transform into *Empire* only now. The most significant of these is the limits reached by capitalism in imperialism. Hardt and Negri write that “*Imperialism would have been the death of capital had it not been overcome*” (333). In its imperialist phase, capitalism had reached the limits of its reliance on the outside. It was Rosa Luxemburg who noted that capitalism is “the first mode of economy unable to exist by itself, which needs other economic systems as a medium and a soil” (224). For Hardt and Negri, imperialism should be seen as originating as a (potential) solution to a constitutive problem of capitalism. In order for there to be an adequate market for capitalists to be able to realize surplus-value, there have to be spaces that are non-capitalist, outside the sphere of capitalist production and not quite beholden to its laws. Inevitably, however, as capitalism expands outside itself in an effort to realize profit and to enable capitalization, it transforms noncapitalist spaces into capitalist ones, subsuming the inside into the outside. This renews the crisis that it was meant

to dissipate and, with no outside left to conquer, a subsequent resolution can come in only one of two ways: revolution—or Empire, a form of capitalism that does not rely on this dialectic of inside and outside, that can operate immanently, and that no longer needs transcendence to protect it from the desires of the multitude.

And so finally: the multitude. The multitude are the heroes of *Empire*—indeed, they are the heroes of history. In the narrative I have just outlined, I have given capitalism a position of historical agency. This is a common enough way of speaking about capitalism, though it is a discourse that fetishizes it in a highly problematic way.⁷ Capitalism, the savvy trickster, anticipates every crisis: ever ahead of critical attempts to understand it, it repeatedly foils expectations of its immanent demise. Hardt and Negri are careful to avoid this error by emphasizing that capitalism is a social relationship with the multitude at its core. For them, “the deterritorializing drive of the multitude is the motor that drives the entire process of capitalist development, and capital must constantly attempt to contain it” (124), which is to say that “resistance is actually prior to power” (360) and not the other way around. Hardt and Negri make it clear that it is the multitude that has to be seen as the real planetary force; Empire is little more than a parasite (62) that drains the multitude’s energy and which is faced with the enormous challenge of controlling the power of the multitude without destroying it. This is also whence the enormous hope that is expressed repeatedly in *Empire* springs. Far from being a time of doom and gloom, political possibilities should be seen as better than ever, in part because capital now operates on the same immanent plane as the multitude and only through its energies. For Hardt and Negri, the end of mediation (expressed politically in forms like the nation and civil society) should not be lamented since what it means is that “having achieved the global level, capitalist development is faced directly with the multitude, without mediation . . . without that barrier, then, the situation of struggle is completely open” (237). Hardt and Negri do not deny that Empire has produced and continues to produce great inequalities and injustices; but it also has produced the conditions of possibility for a new ontology—“a horizon of activities, resistances, wills, and desires that refuse the hegemonic order, propose lines of flight, and forge alternative constitutive itineraries” (48).

This is a necessarily hasty overview of *Empire*. It is also one that doesn’t offer any major challenge to the narrative of capitalist development outlined by Hardt and Negri or even, for that matter, a challenge to any of its constituent parts. This doesn’t mean that I think Hardt and Negri have all the answers. I found the enormous hope that they express about the politics of the present moment to be very affecting, since it seems to open up possibilities that some of the more pessimistic left narratives about globalization have foreclosed. But I also found this hope to be curiously without content. What Hardt and Negri suggest about the politics of the present is certainly

7. For example, see J. K. Gibson-Graham’s (1996/97) instructive analysis of the way in which cultural representations of globalization’s unstoppable, hegemonic agency has effected left perspectives on and responses to globalization.

evocative and provocative; still, it is easy to imagine rejoinders to *Empire* that would express a demand to be shown more concrete examples or signs of the kinds and modalities of resistance that they describe.⁸ Similarly, there are those that might demand of them a more empirically detailed elaboration of (for example) the historical shift from a disciplinary society to a society of control (as they do in their splendid overview of successive moments in the development of U.S. sovereignty [160–82]) or who might wish for them to materialize what some would see (wrongly, I think) as the presentation of a rather idealist philosophy of history.⁹ These are in some respects fair demands, but they also misrepresent the project that Hardt and Negri undertake in *Empire*, which is to elaborate the historical development of a concept: the concept of Empire. This is a theoretical project that emanates from historical, material circumstances; that the emphasis is on concepts does not seem to be a real problem, especially since what I think has been lacking in descriptions of globalizations is a deep reassessment of the ways in which we have conceptualized it.

In any case, the questions that I want to pose with respect to *Empire* emerge out of an assumption that, broadly speaking, their characterization of the ontology of Empire, and of the difference of Empire from previous capitalist formations, is correct. It is not just the fact of globalization that suggests that a new and different organization of global power and control has emerged but also the fact that, conceptually, we seem to have become stuck. Hardt and Negri's claim that Empire is capitalism that has become immanent gets us (as they themselves point out [137–56]) beyond two major conceptual blockages: the endless, circular meditation on a general crisis of epistemology (postmodernism) and the too easy assertion that globalization is nothing more than an intensification or prolongation of imperialism, which implies that the theories we already have are adequate to understand it. What interests me is what the generalized end of mediation characteristic of Empire might mean for the practice of a cultural studies (both in the broad sense outlined by Brennan—cultural studies as antidisiplinary critique—and the narrower one associated with the study of mass and popular culture) that would try to get beyond these blockages. One thing is certain: if the development of capitalism is characterized by a gradual process of becoming immanent, traditional modes of critique have to be fundamentally recon-

8. What immediately leaps to mind, of course, are precisely those protests that I began this paper with. However, while the protests against the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank are remarkable for the fact that they are directed precisely toward those institutions and organizations that help to “structure global territories biopolitically” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 31), they find their limits by still desiring an “outside”—a space or logic other than Empire—that gives their critique moral as well as epistemological force. In other words, it does not seem to me that these constitute forms of immanent protest or resistance; they straddle the borderline between modern forms of critique that draw their power from their ability to distinguish between an inside and an outside (as in ideology critique), and, possibly, a new politics appropriate to Empire, but one that is not yet completely developed.

9. On the question of Marxism's relationship to philosophy, see Balibar, whose characterization of Marx's theoretical thinking as “an alternative to philosophy, a *non-philosophy* or even an *anti-philosophy* . . . the greatest anti-philosophy of the modern age” (1995, 2), may also be taken as an apt description of Hardt and Negri's project in *Empire*.

ceptualized. As many critics have noted, the reason there is such a disturbing degree of overlap between the themes and issues of postcolonial and postmodern theory—and now, theories of globalization—and the contemporary axiomatic of capitalism is not that these forms of critique are theoretical at the expense of being political.¹⁰ The problem with contemporary critique is not a lack of engagement, but rather, a misreading of the socio-ontological terrain of Empire. Both postcolonial and postmodern theory have misidentified the real enemy: “Postmodernists continually return to the lingering influence of the Enlightenment as the source of domination; postcolonial theorists combat the remnants of colonialist thinking” (137). Hardt and Negri suggest that it is most useful to see both postmodern and postcolonial theory as *symptoms* of the end of modern sovereignty, as kinds of critique that can only emerge once modern sovereignty is no longer the framework for control and domination. This modern form of sovereignty, which can be encapsulated as a form of binary (or even dialectical) logic that operates on an ultimately unsustainable separation of inside and outside, transcendent and immanent, has been eclipsed in the transformation of an imperialist capitalism into Empire. Which is why it seems as if those theorists “who advocate a politics of difference, fluidity, and hybridity in order to challenge the binaries and essentialism of modern sovereignty have been outflanked by strategies of power” (138). What is needed most of all, then, is a mode of critique that can directly address the contemporary form of power that now exists. If contemporary criticism has seemed for a while to be caught in a theoretical spiral that it finds difficult to break out of, it is because it has remained modern: alert to and critical of the dualisms of modernity, but beholden to a play of inside and outside that has less and less significance in our contemporary situation. The reason that the classes that I offered this term seemed so unsatisfying is that my introduction to theory was an introduction to a spiral whose dizzying gyrations offered only a blurry vision of the Empire I was hoping to describe.

Nowhere to Go: A Sketch

We are the lost people, our lives in orbit around some awesome planetary imagination.

—Hal Niedzviecki, *We Want Some Too*

I think that Hardt and Negri are right: in order to conceptualize Empire and to imagine a way of pushing through it to something else, we must abandon our desire for and reliance on the outside. There really is nowhere to go: “any postmodern liberation must be achieved within this world, on the plane of immanence, with no possibility of any even utopian outside” (65). This comes as bad news only to those

10. One could, of course, point to an enormous literature here, especially with respect to the politics of postmodernism. For some representative positions of postcolonialism, see Ahmad (1992), Dirk (1997), and Miyoshi (1996).

who feel committed to a form of critique that requires an outside, both in terms of its own operations and the conditions that it proposes to analyze. As long as criticism remains enamored of the modern dialectic or binary of outside/inside, it doesn't appear likely that we will advance our understanding of the present. The problems that arise when an essentially modern form of critique is applied to Empire should be clear to anyone who has grappled with the various attempts to make sense of globalization: in the face of enormous changes in the world, which we register phenomenologically as well as conceptually, what we have been given for the most part are variations on a few themes: cultural destruction and/or hybridization, modernity versus tradition, time versus space, extensivity versus intensivity, Jihad versus McWorld, and so on.¹¹

In its insistence on interdisciplinarity and on (for example) breaking down the barriers between high and low culture, it might seem as if the aim of cultural studies is antimodern in just the right way for conceptualizing Empire. Certainly, a cultural studies that understands its task to be the examination of "how specific [cultural] practices are placed—and their productivity determined—between the social structures of power and the lived realities of everyday life" (Grossberg, 1997, 238), or that is characterized as the study of the processes by which people make history within and through cultural practices though not in conditions of their own making (238), seems uniquely enabled to take up the challenge of understanding culture within the historical formation that Hardt and Negri call Empire. Nevertheless, it is clear, as Grossberg himself has been quick to point out, that at some deep level, cultural studies remains committed to a critique of modern sovereignty, expressed symptomatically in the form of "theorizing political struggles organized around notions, however complex, of identity and difference" (1996, 169), or in its various attempts to isolate genuine utopian longing out of or separate from what Brennan described as a "market sense of popularity" (1997, 231), as if there remains some genuine core of desire that cannot be tainted by its interactions with the empirical world.

I hesitate to suggest that this points to an obvious problem in cultural studies. Taking the idea that there is "nowhere to go" seriously is extremely difficult to do. It seems to me that Hardt and Negri manage to avoid confronting some of the consequences of the end of mediation by failing to consider sufficiently the real lived experience of Empire—or at least, how Empire is lived and experienced in the West. The mass media and contemporary communication technologies—what increasingly constitutes the very stuff of lived reality—have had a large role to play in the creation of Empire. Hardt and Negri are well aware of this, of course, and address communications and the media in relation to Empire in their sections on "Postmodernization" and "Virtualities." What is disconcerting about their view of the communications revolution is that—like everything else—here, too, the concept of mediation is absorbed within the immanent productive machine of Empire. In other words, the media

11. There are a few notable exceptions, such as Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994) and Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), which now both appear to be about Empire *avant la lettre*.

can no longer be taken as *mediating*, as standing between “real” desires and those that are produced or occasioned by the media. Granted, there was always something too simplistic about seeing the media as a machine of mediation intent on burying reality under the weight of its fantasies. Seeing it in this way, however, is one of the things that enabled the separation of popularity from utopianism, false hopes and desires from “true” ones. What was dangerous about the most exaggerated forms of populism in cultural studies was that it proposed to collapse just this distinction between the popular and utopian. Yet in the absence of mediation, a populism that is more or less comfortable with the fact that there is no outside seems suddenly and presciently able to conceptualize Empire more capably and fully than those theories that remain troubled by the way in which contemporary life is lived out increasingly through the fantasy of mass media, whether in the “oligopolistic” mode of broadcast systems or in the form of the potentially more “democratic,” rhizomatic forms that appear to be arising today (2000, 298–300). It is difficult to see in the mediation of the media, which provides a persistent cultural pedagogy that far exceeds all the officially sanctioned pedagogic spaces of modernity (the family, the school, etc.), a kind of fertile soil for the growth of the revolutionary energies of the multitude. And so the first reaction to an assertion of Empire’s immanence is to reject it, in order to preserve the possibility of a familiar and comfortable form of ideology critique.

There may, however, be a different way of articulating the task of cultural studies within the framework of Empire that necessitates neither an acceptance of our collective mass-media fantasy nor a return to this modern form of critique. One might be able to see mass culture as a form of biopower that—just as effectively as the nation once did—continually works to *transform the multitude into a people*. This transformation is different in kind from the one that produces citizens out of the multitude. Unlike the transformation effected by the nation through its disciplinary institutions, the biopolitical power of mass media culture exerts its particular force by creating a *people that looks like a multitude*. This is the specific and unprecedented power of mass media and mass culture more generally.¹² The aim of contemporary capitalist mass culture is not to collapse the heterogeneity of consumer desire into identity and homogeneity; it has become, rather, to produce an infinity of choices so that no one is left out—so that the desire that is associated with the multitude becomes indistinct from the desire for commodities (real and virtual, objects and identities, fantasy, hopes, etc.) that capitalism produces parasitically by harnessing the energies of the multitude. Of course, this suggestion need not be so dire as I am making it out to be. Seen from Hardt and Negri’s perspective, which places “the subjectivity of the social movements of the proletariat at center stage in the process of globalization and the

12. Richard Ohmann has produced an excellent definition of mass culture that encapsulates what I have in mind here: mass culture includes “voluntary experiences, produced by a relatively small number of specialists, for millions across the nation to share, in similar or identical form, either simultaneously or nearly so; with dependable frequency; mass culture shapes habitual audiences, around common needs or interests, and it is made for profit” (1996, 14). For purposes of the present discussion, this would have to be amended to extend beyond the national framework Ohmann has in mind here.

constitution of the global order” (235), this might well be a symptom of the push beyond Empire, of a transformation in capitalism that arises out of the biopolitical existence of the multitude. As capitalism in its immanence attempts to mirror the transformative desire of the multitude in an effort to manage it, it also makes it increasingly possible for the desires of the multitude to manifest itself in ways previously unimaginable.

Still, from the inside, phenomenologically, things don't look or feel quite so rosy. Without an outside to appeal to, it becomes extremely difficult to undertake what seems to be the task that Empire has created for cultural studies. Instead of carefully monitoring the points at which the multitude is transformed into the people—which can now be seen as the primary task of ideology critique, a task that is coincident with the project of the nation—cultural studies now has to make sense of that continual, fluid process by which the multitude is made into a people that look like a multitude or, to formulate it directly without the middle term that here represents the space or possibility of mediation (the “people”), cultural studies in the context of Empire has to make sense of the ways in which *the multitude is produced as the multitude*: those moments in which the circulating desires of the multitude are hijacked and tied to Empire, but in a way that preserves the multiplicity of the multitude and thereby makes it distinct from the people produced by the nation.

This might seem like an unnecessarily abstract formulation of the task that cultural studies needs to undertake in the context of Empire (if such a task can be undertaken at all). A more concrete formulation (or at least its outlines) can be seen in Hal Niedzviecki's recent *We Want Some Too* (2000). Niedzviecki's book is notable for the fact that it is a book of cultural criticism (nonacademic, “popular” criticism) that accepts the immanence of Empire. Neither lamenting nor celebrating the fact that we in the West live in a world thoroughly saturated by mass culture, Niedzviecki explores our attempt to wrest meaning and significance out of the mediated experiences that comprise our lives. He argues that what he finds paradigmatically in the work of the writers of zines, strange underground music collectives, anarchist youth groups, and the like, has in fact become a generalized mode of interaction with mass culture. *Everyone* has become a “plunderer,” a *bricoleur* of contemporary culture in the manner of sound artists like Negativland and John Oswald. Plundering mass culture—taking its forms and objects and making them our own, an activity exemplified by the zine culture to which Niedzviecki is connected—implies an active resistance to the idea and ideals of mass culture, and a form of cultural and political engagement that some cultural critics would laud and applaud. However, when plundering is no longer confined to the underground (a concept that Niedzviecki describes as the myth that “inspires our lifestyle culture desires and leaves us longing for more” [94]) but becomes the now dominant mode of interaction with mass culture (practiced by everyone all the time, the television remote becoming a tool of collage and avant-garde montage), everything becomes a great deal more complicated and ambivalent. As Niedzviecki points out, “even though almost everybody in North America is part of this process to reclaim our culture for ourselves, paradoxically we still re-

main, collectively, a passive society” (72–3). Plundering can constitute a politics only if there is an outside, if (for example) there remains an underground that stands in a genuine relationship of difference from mainstream culture in the way that utopianism can be opposed to simple popularity. In the immanence of Empire, however, plundering constitutes a general law that extends throughout the entire social body. Niedzviecki clearly grasps this. He suggests that the point of plundering, after all, is to “reclaim the spectacle, not deny it” (90). The desire expressed in the activity of plundering is not to escape mass culture but to *enter it more fully*. He writes: “We want our lives to have the kind of importance mass culture confers on, say, a celebrity’s birthday. So it’s not surprising that we now seek to replicate this feeling by attempting to inject our lives, our realities, into the ‘reality’ of mass culture” (171). This is, I think, an accurate, unflinching description of the way in which mass culture functions that refuses to critique the impulse to enter into mass culture more fully on the basis of some more “real” human Being or human reality that is thereby denied or suppressed. At the same time, it is not at all clear what might constitute a politics within such an immanent space. All Niedzviecki can do is what Hardt and Negri do with respect to the politics and energies of the multitude: point to a future that holds out the possibility of “a cultural renaissance of unprecedented proportions” (327).

Throughout *Empire*, Hardt and Negri refer again and again to the “desire” of the multitude. For example, they write that “the multitude’s virtual set of powers is constructed by struggles and consolidated in desire” (2000, 357). But as they are well aware, desire, too, must be seen as immanent, as originating from within Empire and from within the circuits of that mass culture that cultural studies takes as its object. The production of the “*great orchestra of subjectivities reduced to commodities*” (349) determines the limits of desire. At the same time, Hardt and Negri write that they “*struggle because desire has no limit and (since the desire to exist and the desire to produce are one and the same thing) because life can be continuously, freely, and equally enjoyed and reproduced*” (349). The counter-Empire that Hardt and Negri outline in *Empire*’s “Intermezzo,” and again in the final section, “The Multitude against Empire,” is inspirational. It is almost possible to imagine that the “new barbarians” who “destroy with an affirmative violence and trace new paths of life through their own material existence” (215) are already standing at the gates, ready to plunder Empire in order to liberate us. What we don’t know yet, it seems to me, is whether this plundering will constitute a genuine break with Empire or whether it will be turn out to be the form of plundering that Niedzviecki describes, one that forever promises revolution while all the while intensifying and deepening the relationship of our desires to Empire.

As is probably all too evident, I’m not yet sure how to think about popular and mass culture in the context of Empire—a time when “politics is immediately given; it is a field of pure immanence” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 354). I hope instead to have accomplished something much more modest: an articulation of the characteristics of this field of immanence and a first attempt to think through its implications for cultural studies and theoretical critique. I think that Hardt and Negri’s book is invaluable

able insofar as it forces us to seriously reconsider how we should constitute and understand critique at the present moment. I'm not certain if this will help my students to feel more hopeful about the project of theoretical critique; certainly, however, *Empire* will help them to understand what it is about critique that seems at times to be inadequate to describe the present. But perhaps hope is not, after all, the purpose of critique, even if David Harvey is probably right in suggesting that it has become counterproductive to maintain a pessimism of the intellect to go along with the optimism of the will (2000, 17). It is worth remembering that hope for my students came not from their classroom studies (and not, I hope, simply because they found me so boring to listen to), but from the energy of the streets. With the insight that characterizes all of *Empire*, Hardt and Negri remind us that "at a certain point in his thinking Marx needed the Paris Commune in order to make the leap and conceive communism in concrete terms as an effective alternative to capitalist society. Some such experiment or series of experiments advanced through the genius of collective practice will certainly be necessary today to take the next concrete step and create a new social body beyond Empire" (2000, 206).

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