

Commons.fi Abroad

“Even When You Don't See It, It's Still There”: An Interview With Michael Hardt

Taavi Sundell & Tero Toivanen

During the past decade the concept of the common has become a major theme in political philosophy, as well as an issue often discussed by the social movements. One of the key figures in these debates has been American political theorist Michael Hardt, the co-author with Italian philosopher Antonio Negri of *Declaration* (2012), as well as the widely debated Empire trilogy (*Empire, Multitude and Commonwealth* 2000–2009).¹ One evening in October 2012, Commons.fi made an interesting phone call to Hardt. The discussion tackled fundamental aspects of the political economies of today's societies, such as property relations, meaning of the state power in radical politics, climate change and the contemporary state of democracy and global social movements. But it all started with the politics of the common.

It might be a good idea to start with the concept of the common, and the ways in which it came to the fore during your and Antonio Negri's trilogy Empire—Multitude—Commonwealth,² so could you first say a few words about the intellectual and political context which led you to think through this concept in the first place.

I find it interesting how in the last ten years the concept of the common has moved from a philosophical ground, and a point of departure, to a political program. Today it seems clear to me that starting from 2008 or so, the common has become a political point of syntheses of a variety of struggles: ecological struggles, anti-capitalist struggles, struggles against various forms of property, including intellectual property, and other forms of immaterial property. So, what is already clear to everyone is the importance and power of the terrain of the common today as a political terrain of struggle for politics.

What is less clear, thinking back ten, twenty years, is the notion of the common as a ground for philosophical discussion, that I think leads to, and nourishes, this political terrain, or is brought out by it. Already in *Empire*, for instance, the discussion of the common is already present. In part as an alternative to property, but also as a philosophical concept, and a field of investigation.

I also find it remarkable that in a series of theoretical texts that are in the orbit of our work, or say contemporary left philosophy, the common is sometimes an unrecognized and submerged concept, but

¹ Hardt is the chair of the Literature Program at Duke, and currently serves as editor of *The South Atlantic Quarterly*.

² M. Hardt and A. Negri (2001) *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press), trans. in Finnish by A. Häilä et al. (2005) *Imperiumi* (Helsinki: WSOY); M. Hardt and A. Negri (2004) *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Penguin Books); M. Hardt and A. Negri (2009) *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press).

always present. For instance, in Jacques Rancière's great book, *La Méésentente: Politique et philosophie*,³ the common is really quite essential, although not always in the English version translated consistently. The common in there is a field for the sensible, the field in which political recognition and decision making takes place.

So it seems to me an interesting project, and would love if someone else would do it, to think about the philosophical resonances and utilities of the common as a field of perception, and to link that to the contemporary importance of the common as a political synthesis and a field of struggle.

Rancière also writes about the division or the distribution of this common. Now, do you see any connection here with questions concerning the relationship between the common, on the one hand, and common property or common goods, on the other hand? You already mentioned that there is something in the way that the concept of the common is used, which often ends up situating it against various forms of property, but, on the other hand, there are clearly some tensions here, and maybe possibilities to think about how the concept of property could be rethought along similar lines in which you have dealt with concepts such as democracy and communism.

If we move into the contemporary political framework of discussions on the common, there is clearly a great deal of ambiguity, and perhaps there should be a kind of clarifying work done about what is meant by the common. I think one division that is already implied in what you are saying is the division between the common and the public. In many discussions what I would call the public, by which I mean that controlled and regulated by the state, people call it the common, and for me it is very important to make a distinction between the public and the common. Public still functions as a form of property, and here what we mean by property is that it has the same primary characteristics as private property: that is, limited access, and a monopoly of decision-making. That seems to me the defining characteristic of property as a whole in these discussions, both on public and private property. So, that is one division I would say between the public and the common—an area of confusion or mixed discourses which I think it would be helpful to set straight.

It is a slightly different, but also overlapping distinction here that you are making between the common and what sometimes goes as common property or in other discussions as common goods. Here, too, it is helpful to distinguish the common from property, as such, and to avoid conceptual confusions. Also, sometimes attached to these distinctions are real political divisions. One useful scholarly point of reference for the question you just asked, is to think about the passage in Marx's *1844 Manuscripts*,⁴ in which he is trying to bracket off, and separate, his notion of communism from what he is calling crude communism. Crude communism in some ways is characterized by a passage from private property to making those same goods the property of the community, which he is ridiculing and mocking. His example of this transfer of property from private to some notion of communal property, or common property, is the passage of women as property of the bourgeois male, as private property of the husband, to some notion of community of women, in which women remain property, as they are in bourgeois marriage, but are now property of the entire community. It is a bizarre example, but nonetheless gives you an idea of Marx's anxiety about this notion of common property, and the misunderstandings that could follow from that kind of conception. I maintain

³ J. Rancière (1995) *La Méésentente: Politique et philosophie* (Paris: Galilée); trans. in English by J. Rose (1999) *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), trans. in Finnish by H. Kujansivu (2009) *Erimielisyys: Poliittikka ja filosofia* (Helsinki: Tutkijaliitto).

⁴ K. Marx (1988) *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, trans. M. Milligan (New York: Prometheus Books)

that we have to understand the common in contradistinction from any form of property. In other words, whereas property (public or private) designates limited access and a monopoly of decision-making, the common must create open access and collective, democratic decision-making.

Could you maybe elaborate a bit more on how you see this relationship between the common and communism.

One of the ways I have understood the project that Toni and I have been working on in all three volumes of this series of our books is to re-think the basic components of the concept of communism. What do I mean by the basic components of the concept of communism? At least a critique of the state; a critique of property; and the proposition of a real democracy, an absolute democracy, a new democratic organization of society. These are at least some of the components of communism that we try in various ways throughout the books to re-think. So, I would say that the common, both as a philosophical concept, as we were talking before, and as a political terrain of struggle, is a way of exploring the critique of private property today. And I would have to add, once again, not only private property, but also public property.

So thinking about the common here is a challenge at least. It is not really an answer to the question; it is a way of formulating the question of the rule of property and the possibilities of social organization that lie outside the rule of property. So in that sense, I would say it is one of the components that one would have to not only articulate, but also work through and transform, in order today to be able to propose some meaning to the concept of communism. It is one among several fields of work that one would have to do to develop the concept of communism today.

This is obviously closely connected to one of the questions being debated in many of the discussions on the common, that is, what is the role that the state should play in relation to it. Now, would it be a total misrepresentation of your recent work to say that in Declaration⁵ there is a more explicit role for the state to be found as a strategic tool in the fight against the privatization of the common?

I do think that in our view it is a feasible route in certain circumstances today to maintain an antagonistic, but nonetheless strategic, relationship to the state. But it does depend on the circumstances, so that in *Declaration*, at that point you cite, we are primarily talking about the power of the social movements in Latin America, that in the last ten years have developed a kind of double relationship to the leftist governments. It seems to us wrong to say that those leftist governments represent us, and we should support them at all cost, but it also seems wrong to say that those leftist governments are really the same as the neoliberal forces we were fighting against previously, and we should therefore attack them in the same way we attacked the previous governments. What we describe, which is not so much our proposal as our recognition of what people are doing, is maintaining a dual relationship with such states. Not to be satisfied with them and constantly support them or to attack them as the enemy, but to maintain a dual combat: with them against the forces of neoliberalism and against them in the interests of the common.

⁵ M. Hardt and A. Negri (2012) *Declaration* (Kindle Edition: Argo-Navis).

*When one thinks about these different contexts in which these various struggles take place, one is also confronted with the question of organizational forms these struggles should take. For example, David Harvey has in his recent book, *Rebel Cities*,⁶ argued against what he terms as the ‘fetishism of organizational preference’—as an example of which he gives the idea of pure horizontality—and claims that this often stands in the way of exploring effective ways of dealing with large-scale global problems in need of quick solutions, such as global warming. Do you share at all this concern of Harvey’s that certain forms of deliberation and decision making are sometimes just too slow and, if so, what would be the angle from which you would approach this problem?*

Having not yet read Harvey’s book, I am perfectly in support of not maintaining purity in specific political struggles. There can be important moments when one should be aligned with, and can be aligned with, state forces without distorting and blocking a longer project. So, that for instance in a country like Brazil, or Bolivia with very different circumstances, there could be reasons for a project that is aimed at a more democratic organization to be aligned temporarily with progressive states on certain projects. That is already summarized in what we said before, and you are right that corresponds with some of Harvey’s pre-occupation about a purity of horizontality or a demand for an immediate and absolute democracy without taking into consideration some of the mechanisms that might be required as part of a struggle. And I think that, this far, there is a certain agreement.

The question that then rises for me, and an anxiety that maybe should rise for anyone when mentioning that kind of a need for temporary alliances, is the fear that the temporary will become permanent—that the concept of transition will take over the aspiration for something better. I think that it is a healthy anxiety, and it remains for me an anxiety, and that would be the question when posing the relationship between our work and Harvey’s in this regard: what are the mechanisms and aspirations that keep the project moving beyond that compromise?

Another thing, which may be more to your point, is that I do think there are great conceptual and political conflicts that need to be addressed regarding some of the most difficult political problems today. You indicate that a problem like climate change seems to require a non-democratic institution to address it, and I think that this view is not uncommon also in certain ecological circles combatting climate change: an appeal to states or even supranational authorities as the expedient, because it is an urgent question, something that cannot be allowed to develop over decades. It seems to me it is a realm in which many think there should be a suspension of the democratic process and the development of a democratic organization. That seems to me a real and difficult problem and contradiction, and I do not yet recognize the political line and solution to it. It is something for me that became clear in the discussions leading up to the Copenhagen Climate Summit in 2009, and remains for me an unresolved and difficult, but an interesting question: that there are certain problems today, such as climate change, that practices of democratization or democratic horizontal organization do not seem yet capable of addressing, and seem to require, because of their urgency, non-democratic state or supra-state forums. I think that is an important challenge to confront, but I unfortunately do not see any easy solutions.

In Declaration you call for a constituent process to be opened within the various spaces opened up by the cycle of struggles in 2011, such as the revolts and occupations in Tunisia, Egypt, U.S.A., Spain, Greece, and so forth. You place hope in that these struggles will lead, among other things, to the birth of what you name as the ‘institutions of the common,’ which you argue should be based on the principles of freedom, equality, and solidarity. Could you, on the one hand, describe the way in which you

⁶ D. Harvey (2012) *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso).

understand these institutions of the common to function in relation to the common, and, on the other hand, share your thoughts on the current situation of these struggles, and the potentialities, which they have generated?

First of all, it is important to clarify that by ‘institution’ we do not mean fixed bureaucratic structures, but rather a set of practices, and even habits, that allow for a longevity and continuity among struggles. The institutions already developed, such as the general assembly, the commissions and working groups, and the neighborhood assemblies, in the encampments and occupations in 2011, would be the more fixed, or structured poles. But there is also much to think about institutions as certain habits of relating to each other, certain practices of democratic organization and struggle, and to think of them even more broadly as the practices of horizontality and collective decision-making.

So by institutions we mean all of this, and the need for institutions in this regard seems pretty clear to me. This is not something we are saying from outside the movements, but it is something recognized inside the movements. There is a relatively widespread frustration with the ephemeral nature of the movements, and their lack of duration. So, to find ways to continue the project beyond the temporal and spatial limitations of the occupation of a square or a park or a small space is what we are asking for with institutions. They stand for us as a conceptual mechanism to work through this duration and spatial expansion.

The state of the movements does seem to me to follow directly from this. What do we see now in 2012 of the movements that exploded in 2011? I think it is true that we have to recognize the fundamentally discontinuous nature of the movements today—or at least their seeming discontinuity—but also their profound lasting effects. So that for instance we are now just over a year from the beginning of the Zuccotti Park encampment, the Occupy Wall St., and there has been a lot of discussion about the success or the failure of the Occupy. I think that recognizing the discontinuity—for example, there is no longer anyone encamped at the Zuccotti Park—is not really the adequate way of recognizing its effects.

It is much more like Marx’s metaphor about the mole than it is about a continuous process. So that when Marx is trying to recognize the effects of the discontinuous nature of the French revolutionary uprisings: the mole appears in 1789, and then again in 1830, 1848, and 1871. The mole metaphor, for him, establishes a hidden continuity. Even when you don’t see it, it’s still there—and, even more, it’s working out of view. When it next appears it has moved further along. You might view the occupations and encampments of 2011 something like that. What we see with the encampments is something like a bright flash that disappears, but then in the dark you see that it reappears further along the way—it was like a car travelling at night with its lights out, and suddenly when it comes under another streetlight we recognize that it is actually further down the road.

So for instance the 15th of May Movement in Spain, the Indignados, clearly no longer have the encampments, but one of the more profound effects is the way that for example the miner strike, a few months ago, which was not organized by the Indignados, still adopted many of the practices, demands, and organizational forms of the Indignados. So even when the flash of the encampment has disappeared, we recognize in the miner strike that the same spirit and organizational tools have risen again elsewhere. I guess what I am proposing here is an analytical strategy of recognizing the lasting effects of discontinuous struggles. And in some ways our call for institutions is trying to make even more explicit that kind of development, which seems at times hidden from view, but nonetheless to be there.

You have elsewhere argued that whereas the party was the political composition of industrial labor, in the age of new technical composition of labor, that is, immaterial labor, this will be the multitude and its autonomous organizational forms. Do you see any signs of this new political composition forming amongst these discontinuous struggles?

I do, and I see it as a continuing mandate for various forms of political organization today to discover and experiment with democratic horizontal forms. Looking back ten, or twenty years, I think that at that time it was accepted among a limited population in the dominant countries, and among the educated youth. What we have seen increasingly over the last years, and in 2011 in particular, is the fact that the mandate towards democratic organizations is picked up extraordinarily widely. Not just in the dominant countries, not just by the social media youth or something like that, but also among the traditional labor organizations, and among populations that have no access to, or experience with, social media and the internet.

I think one of the recognitions of these past years has been about the generality of that organizational mandate. I should also emphasize that it is not like our concept of the multitude is a recipe or an organizational blueprint, but rather a mandate to experiment. So I would say that the eighteen days at Tahrir Square are obviously different than the organization of alter-globalization movement in Seattle, or even from the insurrection in Argentina in 2001, but it is an experimentation with answering the same mandate. So that is the way in which I would situate what I find so general and pressing today.

Moving on to the US, the presidential elections are just around the corner, and the first televised debate between the candidates took place just a few days ago (October 3). Given that for many in the progressive movements Obama represented hope for an alternative future in 2008, how do you see the four years of Obama's presidency now that you look back on them?

I would love for someone to figure out how to do a study about the extent to which the inspiration and energies of Occupy derived from the combination of hope and disappointment that the Obama campaign of 2008 generated. I think that what we know, and what is quite clear, is that there was an enormous mobilization and generation of ungrounded hopes in social transformation raised by the 2008 Obama campaign. And the subsequent disappointment of those who had been mobilized for the electoral campaign were also predictable. Someone would have to design some sort of an empirical study to clarify this, but it seems to me logical that that cycle of hope and disappointment, nourished and frustrated desires, at least prepared the ground, if not more, for the affects and agendas that surrounded Occupy.

If that were true, that seems to me already a really important consequence of the Obama presidency. A kind of, what should we call it, a democratic by-product of a deeply undemocratic process. That might be one way of saying that there is a long-standing dilemma that people in our segment of the left have. On one side someone will say that you have to vote for the center-left party, the Democratic Party, because it is better than the other, and on the other side a person will say that really there is no difference; they are both horrible, they will both go to war, they will both destroy women's rights etc.

Thinking about these kinds of electoral politics in terms of the space they afford for the movements, the effects they will have for the movements, is a more useful way of understanding their effects. I am not making any proposition of people voting or not voting, and it seems to me quite reasonable and useful that many of the movements have not answered this question, since it could lead to the death of what is alive in these movements, either in Spain, or in the US. I think, nonetheless, that the electoral processes, especially in the US with Obama, have interesting effects on them.

Coming back to where we started this interview, you and Negri have collaborated for quite some time now, and your works have had quite an impact both within academia, as well as within the social movements. Any plans at the moment to continue this collaboration, or was Declaration maybe some sort of a final statement of this project of yours?

I do not think we will stop writing together. I have thought of it often as a condition of our friendship that there is always a book that we are writing. So it might be that from my perspective it is the friendship that's primary, and the books are a kind of a by-product of a friendship. So, we have no book to propose now, but we have not stopped.