Book Review: Assembly by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri

Why is it that so many revolutions and other social movements have seemingly failed to bring their emancipatory ideals into being? In response to this enduring question, **Michael Hardt** *and* **Antonio Negri** *offer* **Assembly***, which inverts the traditional division of revolutionary labour to give strategic force to the assembly of the multitude. While the book aims to offer a blueprint for forms of collective organisation that can bring about a more democratic and just society,* **Joshua Smeltzer** *is unconvinced that the authors' hollowing out of the traditional sphere of the political can deliver this social alternative.*

Assembly*.* Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Oxford University Press. 2017.

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Writing in the aftermath of the Revolutions of 1848, Karl Marx famously posited that 'revolutions are the locomotives of history', its driving force. And yet, looking back from the present day, revolutions and other social movements have largely failed to enact their emancipatory ideals. Hardt and Negri's newest work of political theory, *Assembly*, begins by asking why that should be the case: 'why have the movements, which address the needs and desires of so many, not been able to achieve lasting change and create a new, more democratic and just society?' (xiii).

Hardt and Negri's answer to this perennial question for the left involves an ambitious critique of previous theories of revolutionary leadership, represented by the mythical figure of the centaur: the 'upper, human half', symbolising the leader, 'designates the strategic capacities', while the lower, beast half, representing the multitude, manages tactics (15). Hardt and Negri's model is instead the inversion of this revolutionary division of labour: leaders will take on a tactical role while the multitude forms strategy 'from below' (78). From this new vantage point, the multitude will be free to form an assembly: 'a *constitutive* right, that is, a mechanism for composing a social alternative, for taking power differently, through cooperation in social production' (295). Once the assembly is formed, the promised 'democratic and just society' will duly follow.

In issuing a call to the multitude, *Assembly* follows in the footsteps of Hardt and Negri's preceding *Empire* trilogy – *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004) and *Commonwealth* (2009) – and maintains the same structure of their previous collaborations: brief intermezzos, always printed in cursive, punctuate the text and offer musings on 'The End of Mitteleuropa' (134-38) and 'Extremism of the Center' (245-51). This time, however, the authors use a call and response structure inspired by 'songs sung by slaves in the plantation fields' (xxi-xxii). While this is a novel way to structure a work of political theory, it does fragment the narrative cohesion of the text: calls are issued and then forgotten for 70 pages before suddenly receiving their belated and often disjointed response.
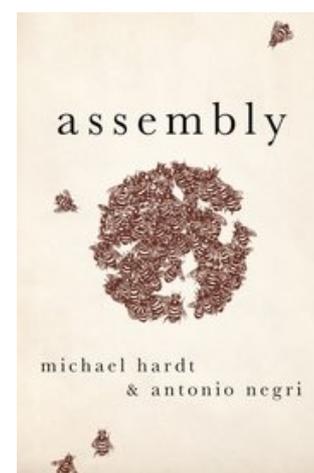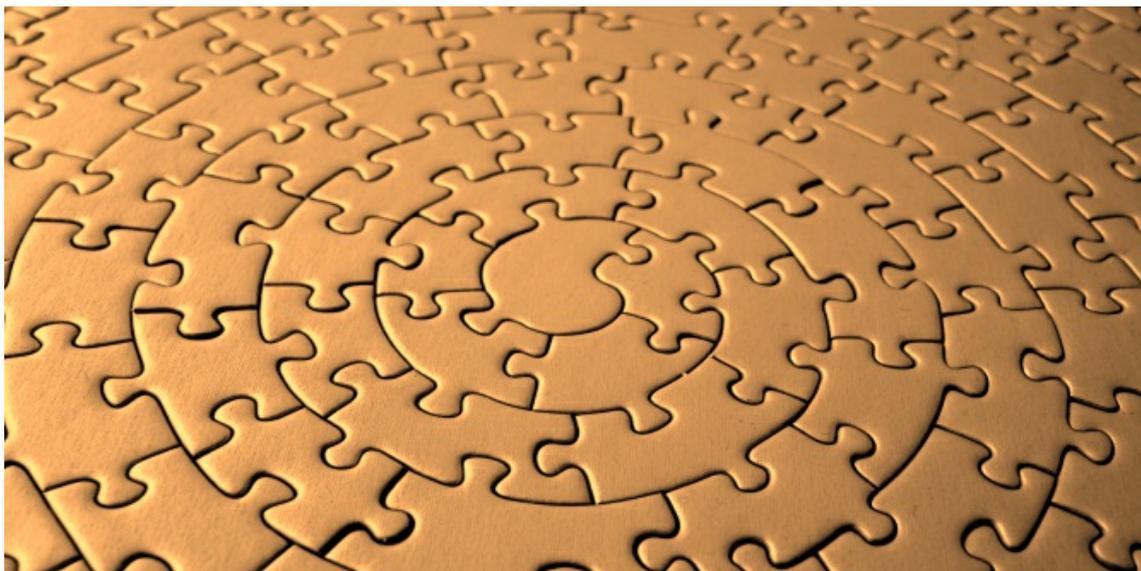
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Ultimately, *Assembly* is a blueprint for empowering the multitude as the means of establishing a more just society – much of the book is devoted to describing ideal forms of collective organisation and decision-making that could democratise social movements. Hardt and Negri stress that once social movements have been sufficiently democratised, they will not only be more effective in obtaining their demands, but they will also produce new forms of democratic subjectivities (231). Furthermore, the authors reject the binary choice between reform and revolution for social movements, instead opting for 'active counterpowers': 'antagonistic formations within and against the state' (254). The Polish Solidarity movement, the Zapatistas and the Cocaleros are held up as examples of social movements which 'make a *nonsovereign* claim on power': a claim in which sovereignty will be 'rendered inoperative or destroyed' (256). At stake is nothing less than 'a revolutionary process that makes existing social subjectivities, in all their differences, into a new Prince' (257).

However, Chapter Seven, 'We, Machinic Subjects', provides a glimpse of the resignation and complacency veiled in the paroles of revolutionary activism. The chapter begins with a call to reconceptualise the relationship between humans and machines: 'Instead of rejecting technology […] we must start from within the technological and biopolitical fabric of our lives and chart from there a path of liberation' (107). The authors bring together Martin Heidegger, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer and criticise them for 'positing an *ontological* division and even opposition between human life and machines' (109) in the wake of the Second World War. Instead, Hardt and Negri follow Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in arguing that humans and machines belong on the same 'ontological plane' (122) and form 'machinic assemblages' (121). This is intended to provide the principles of a 'humanism after the critical adoption of the Nietzschean declaration of the ''death of man''' (121). The future of revolutionary politics thus resides in properly acknowledging the inseparability of humankind and machine, of accepting our ontological position as 'machinic subjects'.

For a brief moment during their discussion of new forms of resistance open to 'machinic subjects', Hardt and Negri appear not as hardened Marxist intellectuals but rather as members of the Silicon Valley elite, writing:

> when we look at young people today who are absorbed in machinic assemblages, we should recognize that their very existence is resistance. Whether they are aware or not, they produce in resistance (123).

That technology can allow for an even more pervasive form of capitalism, that mechanisation facilitates disciplinary control or that resistance itself can by stymied by technological tools – all of this is washed away by a naïve belief that technology will ultimately provide an effective site of political resistance and form a 'path to liberation' (107). That Hardt and Negri are willing to accept the intrusion of technology into all aspects of human life, to the point of rejecting any ontological distinction between humans and machines in favour of 'machinic subjects', only serves to undercut potential revolutionary forces by subverting the uniquely human nature of political activity.

Yet, subverting the primacy of the political sphere forms an integral part of the agenda laid out in *Assembly* – Hardt and Negri devote an entire subchapter to arguing 'against the autonomy of the political'. The underlying justification is that 'political rationality and political action can no longer be considered autonomous but always completely embedded in the circuits of social and economic life' (45). Indeed, the authors suggest that politics is just a 'noisy sphere' (xv), a distraction from social and economic spheres. Hardt and Negri's notion of politics as epiphenomenal is both unsatisfactory and counterproductive as it undercuts political life, the very domain where the struggle over the type and form of communal existence takes place.

Aversion to the political sphere ultimately muddies the conceptual analysis in *Assembly*. For example, Hardt and Negri's critique of constituent power involves distorting the concept to the point of reducing it to an empty signifier, devoid of any meaning. The pair posits that the concept underwent an 'immersion in biopolitics' and that 'the content of constituent power tends to become life itself' (36). However, the reader neither learns when this immersion supposedly happened nor how it is conceptually possible. Hardt and Negri have severed the concept from its literal and historical meaning – the act of giving a legal constitution – and instead appropriate it for discussing 'social behaviors and new technologies of subsistence, resistance, and transformation of life' (41). Two chapters later, the authors turn again to give the concept an ontological meaning, defining it as 'constituting new common being' (68). Both of these appropriations divorce constituent power from its specific legal and political meaning and history within European public law, ultimately stripping the concept of any theoretical import in discussing political life.

Hardt and Negri's newest intellectual contribution might prove of interest to those who enjoy paragraph-length sentences and the periodic intrusion of auditory hallucinations: 'and yet – whispers some evil genius in our ears – the conditions of the world today are not propitious' (xvi). However, as a work of political theory for the present, *Assembly,* with its hollowing out of the political sphere, only manages to derail the locomotive of history.

Joshua Smeltzer is a doctoral student at the University of Cambridge pursuing a PhD in Politics and International Studies, with a focus on twentieth-century German political thought. Read more by Joshua Smeltzer.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.