

# Is the Contemporary Global Political Order Describable in Terms of 'Empire'?

Written by Rebecca Kaisler

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REBECCA KAISLER, AUG 1 2011

When *Empire* by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri was released in 2000, it was heralded as “the most successful work of political theory to come from the left for a generation”.<sup>[1]</sup> Indeed, *Empire* presents a postmodernist challenge to the realist and liberal traditions that have dominated International Relations for the past three decades. Based on the fundamental premise that the sovereignty of the nation-state has eroded and been replaced by the all-encompassing concept of ‘Empire’, the book provides an alternative way of conceptualizing the ways that various international actors relate and interact. The authors draw from a body of rich philosophical tradition including that of Michel Foucault, Karl Marx, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari in order to supplement their work. Despite the questions that it raises to challenge the traditional conception of the ‘international’, *Empire* is also deeply flawed. It is highly theoretical, often contradictory, and predicated on assumptions about a future that has yet to come about. As a result, *Empire*’s contribution to International Relations is mainly theoretical – the work’s thesis about the emergence of ‘Empire’ offers little practical insight into the workings of the contemporary global political order.

This paper will examine the challenge that Hardt and Negri’s conception of ‘Empire’ poses to the realist and liberal International Relations traditions by evaluating the authors’ argument about the relevance of ‘Empire’ in the real world. It will discuss Hardt and Negri’s emphasis on biopower and the role of the multitude, the de-territorialization of power within the international order, and the role of conflict (referred to as ‘interventions’) in legitimating ‘Empire’. Finally, it will provide an overview of the major failings of ‘Empire’ and why it is ultimately incapable of providing an adequate description of the contemporary global order (if, indeed, there is such an ‘order’ in existence).

The ‘Empire’ upon which Hardt and Negri predicate their view of the world is different from traditional conceptions of the term. Historically, the term ‘empire’, as described by the dictionary, has been used to refer to ‘a political unit having an extensive territory or comprising a number of territories or nations and ruled by a single supreme authority; and the territory included in such a unit’. In the imperialist tradition, sovereign nation-states competed with each other for acquisition of territory, and access to resources and markets.<sup>[2]</sup> For Hardt and Negri, the modern forces of globalization, transnational capital, and the world market have led to the deterioration of the sovereignty the nation-state, which has been replaced by a singular, supranational force known as ‘Empire’.<sup>[3]</sup> As they describe it, “Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a de-centered and de-territorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers”.<sup>[4]</sup>

Hardt and Negri’s ‘Empire’ is not imperialist, but imperial: supranational, politically neutral, and all encompassing. As a theoretical approach, the authors argue that it “effectively encompasses the spatial totality”, transcends time and history, penetrates all levels of society and, although “continually bathed in blood, the concept of Empire is always dedicated to peace – a perpetual and universal peace outside of history”.<sup>[5]</sup> ‘Empire’ did not emerge spontaneously, but was created through the forces of globalization, increased world-wide flows of capital, and the subsequent emergence of transnational corporations in the 1990s and 2000s. These forces led to the erosion of the sovereignty of the nation-state as it could neither control them nor constrain them within a physical location.<sup>[6]</sup> Indeed, as Green describes, “The capacities of nation-states depend upon their ability to demarcate geographical history...and to fix

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the mass of the laboring population within those borders.”[7] Globalization and the growth of a world market constrained the ability of nation-states to perform these tasks and, as a result, eroded their authority. Hardt and Negri also note that the forces driving the emergence of 'Empire' were not directed by the United States.[8] Instead, the United States occupies a “privileged position” within 'Empire' (although Hardt and Negri fail to elaborate as to what this entails) based on its resource capacities.[9]

'Empire' presents a theoretical challenge to the dominant traditional realist and liberal theories of International Relations by removing the nation-state as the main possessor of sovereignty. In both realism and liberalism, the nation-state is a key (or in the case of realism, the only) actor in the anarchical international society. All analysis of international relations operates within and in relation to the bounds of the nation-state. By removing the sovereignty of the nation-state, 'Empire' encourages a re-conceptualization of what sovereignty constitutes. By including the entire territorial globe within its jurisdiction, 'Empire' removes the insider/outsider relationship inherent to realism and liberalism. In the old 'imperialist' world order, nation-states constructed their conception of sovereignty in opposition to other nation-states.[10] Such a conception is inherently hierarchical, especially when considering the position of the colony versus the imperial power. As Hardt and Negri describe, “The Oriental, the African, the Amerindian are all necessary components for the negative foundation of European identity and modern sovereignty as such....The colony stands in dialectical opposition to European modernity, as its necessary double and irrepressible antagonist.”[11] In 'Empire', this hierarchy of nation-states, as with their sovereignty, is stripped away. Everyone and everything is included in and ruled over by 'Empire' – there is no 'outside'. [12]

Political, economic, and social power in 'Empire' no longer resides with the nation-state but has been distributed amongst many supranational organizations, institutions, and companies.[13] The nation-state has lost all importance, as Hardt and Negri clarify in a later work, but it “can no longer claim the role of sovereign or ultimate authority as they could in the modern era”. [14] Institutions such as World Bank, United Nations, European Union, non-governmental organizations, and transnational companies have risen to power. The authors' use transnational corporations as an example of how 'Empire' erodes the sovereignty of nation-states in saying that they, “directly distribute labor power over various markets, functionally allocate resources, and organize hierarchically the various sectors of world production”. [15] Transnational corporations determine the world market by interacting with each other, completely bypassing the nation-state at the decision-making level, and effectively eroding its power.

Just as the passage from traditional empire to 'Empire' was marked by the erosion of the nation-state's sovereignty, so too was there a transition from the disciplinary society to the society of control, two concepts inherited from Foucault. The disciplinary society, in which obedience to social norms and customs is controlled through disciplinary institutions, such as universities, schools, and prisons, was prominent in early capitalist Europe and was a trademark of imperialist nation-states concerned with the acquisition of capital. With the emergence of 'Empire', the disciplinary society changed into the society of control where social norms are promoted by apparatuses that penetrate all levels of society and social relations.[16] 'Empire' exercises biopower (power concerned with the governance and production of life) to “regulate social life from its interior”. [17] Social norms become so deeply embedded in the daily practice and functioning of humanity ('the multitude', a new name for Marx's proletariat) that they become self-reproducing and reinforcing. As a result, “the imperial machine, far from eliminating master narratives, actually produces and reproduces them...in order to validate and celebrate its own power”, thus legitimizing 'Empire'. [18]

'Empire' controls the multitude and maintains the international social order by employing the state of exception and utilizing its police apparatus. As it is dedicated to the production and maintenance of universal peace, 'Empire' most effectively proves its legitimacy by displaying the “effectiveness of its use of force” in quelling elements within the world order that threaten its stability.[19] In order to identify such elements, 'Empire' possesses the power to declare the 'state of exception'; in short, the ability to declare a particular group rebelling against the norms that the supranational power promotes as 'the enemy'. Once the enemy has been identified, 'Empire' then utilizes its police force to stage an intervention by which to bring the rebelling group back into line and restore the international order. Such interventions are justified using a rhetoric of human rights and international law. In this way, 'Empire' is not acting coercively against its subjects, but, rather, 'guaranteeing human rights' or 'subduing the terrorist'. [20]

Hardt and Negri cite the 1990-1991 Gulf War as a prime example of the forces of 'Empire' e.g., the United Nations)

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at work in staging an intervention to maintain the international order. After Iraq invaded Kuwait on the shaky claim of territorial sovereignty in order to gain access to the small sheikhdom's oil fields, the UN, launched an aerial and ground assault against Iraqi forces. This was followed by a policy of strict economic sanctions that subdued the Iraqi government and prevented its ability to engage in similar behavior in the future. In this case, 'Empire' was not only restoring universal peace, but also utilizing the capacities of its most resource-endowed actor, the US, to guarantee access to Middle Eastern oil for the global economy.[21]

From the very outset, these assertions prove problematic if one wishes to apply the description of Hardt and Negri's 'Empire' to the contemporary global political order. If everything in the world is included within 'Empire', then what exactly is 'Empire'? There is no 'outside' with which to compare it and so identification of the agents and structures that constitute 'Empire' proves to be impossible.[22] Certainly, this is not the case in the current global order. If anything, there has been a recent trend towards consolidation and reaffirmation of identity amongst nation-states. Thus, membership in the European Union represents an unprecedented level of judicial and economic integration by its 27 member nations. But, there has been little public support shown for attempts at increased political integration and the formulation of a 'European' identity. The Treaty of Lisbon, which granted a limited increase in political power to the EU, took over two years and was modified several times before being reaching a suitable level of acceptability so as to allow it to be passed in 2009.[23] More recently, the aftermath of the financial crisis of the late 2000s has resulted in intense debate over whether it is appropriate for the EU to 'bail out' those members on the verge of bankruptcy. Germany and France, formerly amongst the strongest proponents of European integration, have shown significant reluctance to initiate financial packages to save the failing Euro-zone, especially when such measures have the potential of disadvantaging their own national economies.[24]

The notion of the de-territorialization of power has prompted the most rebuke amongst critics of 'Empire'. Hardt and Negri's 'Empire' is based upon the assumption that the sovereignty of the nation-state has eroded so thoroughly that all power has been fully integrated into supranational organizations. An unprecedented level of international political and economic integration has occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century in the form of such institutions as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the European Union, but it is nowhere near as extensive as Hardt and Negri assert. In the current global political order, nation-states remain wary of any agreement or institution that threatens their sovereignty. For example, Switzerland and Norway have refused to cede any measure of economic sovereignty by joining the European Union. The United States has repeatedly refused to ratify entrance into the International Criminal Court because the potential for the ICC to prosecute military officials for war crimes "could impede the United States in carrying out military operations and foreign policy programs, impinging on the sovereignty of the United States".[25] Additionally, Reid argues that trends towards de-territorialization are actually strategies used by nation-states to exert biopolitical power. The forces of globalization and transnational capital require certain levels of de-territorialization, which the nation-state can employ strategically to reassert its sovereignty.[26]

Overemphasis on the erosion of national sovereignty also fails to take into account the national interests that so blatantly dominate the current international political order. Viewed with the rose-tinted spectacles of 'Empire', the recent UN intervention in Libya could be seen as the supranational organization exercising its sovereignty by bringing rogue elements (the Qaddafi regime), which are threatening the international order and 'universal norms' of human rights, back into line through utilization of the police force (NATO, the US and its allies). Indeed, the speech given by UK Prime Minister David Cameron at the London Conference on Libya would seem to support this view. He based the justification for the Libya intervention on protecting human rights, stating "Freedom of expression. The right to free and fair elections...Respect for human rights and the rule of law. These aren't values that belong to any one nation. They are universal".[27] For a moment, it appears as if perhaps elements of 'Empire' can be seen in the current international order. However, such an evaluation disintegrates if one takes a realist view of the situation. Cameron's rhetoric of human rights is almost certainly a strategy to gain public approval of the Libya intervention and to win the support of allied nation-states. Despite knowledge of the Qaddafi regime's history of repression and human rights violations, the UK has pursued arms deals with Libya in the past, most recently in 2009.[28] This suggests that the 'protection of human rights' is a concern only when it suits the national interest.

The United States has also employed a similar argument for universal rights in attempting to justify the intervention to

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domestic and international audiences. However, as President Obama's address to the nation regarding Libya demonstrates, national interests also played a major role in influencing the US's involvement in the intervention: "America has an important strategic interest in preventing Qaddafi from overrunning those who oppose them. A massacre would have driven thousands of additional refugees across Libya's borders, putting enormous strains on the peaceful – yet fragile – transitions in Egypt and Tunisia".[29] Could the Libyan intervention merely be a case of the UN trying to protect human rights and international norms by preventing Qaddafi from murdering civilians, as Hardt and Negri would assert is in accordance with 'Empire'? Perhaps. At the same time, it seems likelier that the dominant nation-states within the UN, chiefly the UK, US, and France, view Qaddafi's regime as a threat to their interests in the region. When Libya was bordered by Western-friendly regimes, Qaddafi was viewed as an unstable dictator, but one who could be kept in check by his more stable neighbors. Recently, however, the 'Arab Spring' revolutions of 2011 have resulted in regime changes and political uncertainty in many of the neighboring states. It is now in the interests of the US and its allies to ensure that democratic governments friendly to their interests are cultivated within these nations. The insecurity created by the Qaddafi regime and its attacks on civilians have become too problematic to ignore. Hence, the decision to launch an intervention, albeit one veiled under the auspices of freeing the Libyan people "from violence and oppression".[30]

Another problem with the application of the description of 'Empire' to the current global political order is that it vests power in the hands of supranational institutions whilst at the same time also de-politicizing them. To Hardt and Negri, once the sovereignty of the nation-state has eroded, there is no such thing as national interest or international hierarchy. While they do not address the topic much in *Empire*, it appears that the supranational bodies that dominate and rule in 'Empire' are concerned with equality and do not have a specific political agenda, other than maintaining the international order and assuring that the multitude remains productive. Such political equality does not exist within the supranational institutions of the contemporary international order.

Despite presenting an alternative way of thinking about the nature of sovereignty, 'Empire' is describing a world that has not yet emerged and does not, at present time, seem likely to do so. While an unprecedented level of cooperation and integration is taking place in the global political order through involvement in supranational organizations as the United Nations and the European Union, the nation-state still remains the dominant player and holder of sovereignty. Contrary to what Hardt & Negri argue, globalization and transnational capital flows have not eroded state sovereignty, but have actually strengthened the state. Nations may employ justify their actions using a discourse of human rights and international law, but they ultimately act in what they perceive to be their own interests. At the present time, it remains more appropriate to conceptualize the contemporary global political order in terms of traditional understandings of the international – one in which sovereign states cooperate and compete to achieve their end goals and acquire power.

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[1] M. Bull (2001).

[2] Hardt and Negri (2000), xiii.

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[3] Ibid., xii.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., xv.

[6] Ibid., xi.

[7] Green (2002), 40.

[8] Hardt and Negri (2000), 3.

[9] Ibid., xiv.

[10] Barkawi and Laffey (2002), 121.

[11] Hardt and Negri, 115.

[12] Walker (2002), 343.

[13] Green (2002), 46.

[14] Hardt and Negri in Aronowitz (2003), 110.

[15] Hardt and Negri (2000), 32.

[16] Ibid., 23.

[17] Ibid., 24.

[18] Ibid., 34.

[19] Ibid., 34.

[20] Ibid., 37.

[21] Green (2002), 54.

[22] Walker (2002), 343.

[23] Kupchan (2010).

[24] Barysch (2010), 5.

[25] Elsea (2006), 5.

[26] Reid (2005), 248.

[27] U.K. Foreign & Commonwealth Office (2011).

[28] Smith (2011), 11.

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