

Is Postcolonial Theory Outdated?

In their book *Empire* Hardt and Negri suggest that globalization has changed the world so much as to make postmodern and postcolonial theories, which they see as essentially the same, no longer relevant. Thus one must respond to this challenge and investigate whether Hardt and Negri's assertion that postcolonialists are looking at a vanished time is valid. This examination of globalization will be primarily based upon *Empire*, with some additional textual citations from *Provincializing Europe* and Hardt's review of this work in *Postcolonial Studies*, "The eurocentrism of history." First one must address their objections head on, examining their reasons for critiquing postcolonial theory. It might be well said that Hardt and Negri object in some way to parts of the time period and object of postcolonial critique. Having thus done this one must then move beyond these initial criticisms to see where the two theories stand with respect to each other. An investigation of the question of history will provide insight into how these theories view the past and its role on the present. Finally one must examine the role of difference and their prescriptions for action. A close examination of all these topics will reveal that Hardt and Negri are being somewhat short-sighted in their dismissal and that postcolonial theory is also able to effectively address globalization. However, this does not make the theory of *Empire* irrelevant—rather, the two theories can coexist, contributing different elements of critique against totalizing power. It is only in their aspirations to be a universal critique of the present that either might be found deficient.

To answer if globalization has made postcolonial theory irrelevant, one must first answer what globalization is. Hardt and Negri define globalization as the novel global

nature of capital and production, and the power that is associated with it (*Empire*, 8-9). Chakrabarty also addresses what can be understood as globalization, saying, “Even when 'capital' is ascribed a 'global', as distinct from European, beginning, it is still seen in terms of the Hegelian idea of a totalizing unity—howsoever internally differentiated—that undergoes a process of development in historical time,” (*Provincializing Europe*, 47). Here Chakrabarty suggests a critique of capital similar to that found throughout *Empire*, that is, that global capital is a totalizing entity. However, he does note an inadequacy in global capital, that it can never represent the universal logic of capital. Differences between the authors remain: Chakrabarty is criticizing global capital for its historicist thought, while Hardt and Negri criticize it for its control of production. However, in the end they both come to criticize global capital for being a totalizing force that subjugates all those outside of it.

Postcolonial theory sees more in the current globalized world than just global capital. Made much more explicit in Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large* and Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, globalization is also understood to encompass the new diasporas of the present age. However, this aspect of globalization is not ignored by Hardt and Negri; in their description of the multitude they say, “the multitude gains the power to affirm its autonomy, traveling and expressing itself through an apparatus of widespread, transversal territorial reappropriation,” (*Empire*, 398). Perhaps even more explicitly similar to postcolonial theory and its exaltation of the diasporic, Hardt and Negri state, “Through circulation the multitude reappropriates space and constitutes itself as an active subject,” (*Empire*, 397). Thus both postcolonial theory and the theory of *Empire* share a view of globalization that includes both global capital and global diasporas. The differences then, lie in interpretation and emphasis. Write large, Hardt and

Negri emphasize the role of capital in globalization, to the point of subsuming the new diasporas within their notion of capital, while postcolonial theory places at least equal weight on diasporas.

As mentioned above, Hardt and Negri criticize postcolonial theory on several fronts. The first area of contention is the time period of critique. On postcolonialists Hardt and Negri declare, “they mistake today's real enemy,” for they describe and contest a modern sovereignty that no longer exists (*Empire*, 137-138). As they put it, “a new paradigm of power, a postmodern sovereignty, has come to replace the modern paradigm,” (*Empire*, 138). Thus at first glance they are relegating postcolonialism to the junk of history; it is a series of critiques that attacks the phantoms of long-gone modes of power. However, they see it as more than merely anachronistic, but also complicit in the workings of Empire: postcolonialist strategies “would not challenge but in fact coincide with an even unwittingly reinforce the new strategies of rule!” (*Empire*, 138). However, such accusations seem unfair, especially when one considers that they proclaim “the deterritorializing power of the multitude is the production force that *sustains* Empire and at the same time the force that calls for and makes necessary *its destruction*,” (*Empire*, 61)—is not the multitude guilty of the same thing? Luckily, Hardt and Negri recognize that postcolonial theory is complicit in Empire inasmuch as *everything* is absorbed into it, from which there is no more outside. They note, on the same page as they accuse postcolonial theory of supporting Empire, that “postcolonialist theorists are [not] somehow the lackeys of global capital and the world market,” (*Empire*, 138). Hardt extends an olive branch in his review of *Provincializing Europe*, saying, “Indeed, the tradition of postcolonial studies may be the best foundation form which to embark on such a reorientation of our critical and political energies,” (“The eurocentrism of history,”

249).

The next point of contention between Hardt and Negri and postcolonial theory is in the object of critique. For Hardt and Negri their object of critique is quite clear: Empire. This Empire claims “a sovereignty that locates its only point of reference in the definitive absoluteness of the power that it can exercise,” (*Empire*, 39) and is a “globalized biopolitical machine,” (*Empire*, 40). As seen above in their claim that postcolonialists “mistake the real enemy,” Hardt and Negri object to postcolonialism's object of critique, the universals of the Enlightenment. They do not see postcolonial theories as entirely worthless, as “these theories point toward Empire, but in a vague and confused way, with no awareness of the paradigmatic leap that this passage constitutes,” (*Empire*, 139). However, as seen in this qualification, they see postcolonial theory as fundamentally blind to what *should* be its proponents' object of critique. Such criticism seems especially harsh on two accounts. First, one must question if the postcolonial object of critique is all that different from the one of Empire. As has been mentioned previously, the two notions of globalization are not as different as one might assume, suggesting that rapprochement is possible. Second, one need not take Hardt and Negri on their word that theirs is the proper, exclusive object of critique. Postcolonialism might respond that the theory of Empire in fact perpetuates a totalizing notion to which it is blind, namely that capital is implicitly tied to power relations. Chakrabarty says, “Guha's critique of the category 'prepolitical', I suggest, fundamentally pluralizes the history of power in global modernity and separates it from any universalist narratives of capital,” (*Provincializing Europe*, 14). Thus Chakrabarty is claiming that the union of power and universalist capital can be separated, which Hardt and Negri believe to be impossible. He continues, “Subaltern historiography questions the assumption that capitalism necessarily

brings bourgeois relations of power to a position of hegemony,” (*Provincializing Europe*, 14). With this statement the criticism has been turned around; capital is denied the status of an all-dominating totality. In some sense the reader is left with a value judgment to make, as both can make compelling arguments for their object of critique as being the most dire.

The question of history is fundamental to both theories, and an investigation of their notions of history will provide insight into their *Weltanschauungs*. Hardt and Negri suggest that Empire is a fundamental break from past systems, as “with the appearance of Empire, we are confronted no longer with the local mediations of the universal but with a concrete universal itself,” (*Empire*, 19). Hardt and Negri appear guilty of a stagist view of history suggested, if not existing, in Hegel and Marx when they claim, “Empire is better in the same way that Marx insists that capitalism is better than the forms of society and modes of production that came before it,” (*Empire*, 43). Chakrabarty is critical of such a notion of history, which he describes as a “transition narrative,” (*Provincializing Europe*, 31). The problem as he sees it, is that such narratives imply a measure of incompleteness or lack, specifically in respect to European existence, “the 'failure' of a history to keep an appointment with its destiny (once again an instance of the 'lazy native', shall we say?),” (*Provincializing Europe*, 31). Therefore, Hardt and Negri could be seen as perpetuating a system of thought that subordinates those outside of Europe. While it is true they are suggesting a sort of stagist, universalist history, it seems unfair to accuse them suggesting those who fail to participate in Empire are somehow diminished, lesser; in fact, since nothing can be outside of Empire it would be be bizarre to suggest that their notion is exclusionary.

However, another critique may be leveled at Hardt and Negri: they have a notion

of non-existing history, or rather, they posit a *tabula rasa*. In their criticism of postcolonial theory their chief objection is the belief that the colonial past and the modernist socio-political system are *irrelevant*, that postcolonial theory fails to address the postmodern world that currently exists and that any critiques it makes are at best inapplicable and at worst supportive of Empire. Chakrabarty suggests such a notion of the irrelevance of the past can be found in the modernist belief in the “true present.” The true present is understood to be a “zero point in history,” in which the goal to “wipe out whatever came earlier,” (*Provincializing Europe*, 244), has succeeded. Such a state of *terra nullis* is desirable because it is supposed that “historical possibilities are now created by reason alone,” (*Provincializing Europe*, 245). In Marx Chakrabarty sees an uncertainty, a desire to both create something novel and an acknowledgment of the fact that “the new can be imagined and expressed only through a language made out of the languages already available,” (*Provincializing Europe*, 245). It is true, no one exists outside of a past, and Hardt and Negri do acknowledge the past in their conception of Empire as a stage of capitalism. However, in their repeated proclamations of the novelty of Empire and their refusal consider the roles old powers, prejudices, and systems of thought might still play Empire is proclaimed to arise *ex nihilo*. Why might it be short-sighted of Hardt and Negri to wipe away the past? For one, it is questionable how a successful liberatory movement might arise against Empire, the anti-Empire, with only reason to motivate and unite. This is a classic objection to Marxism, one to which are replies of notions of false consciousness and the importance of the Leninist revolutionary vanguard. Second, might Hardt and Negri be seeing merely what they wish to see? Chakrabarty suggests that this *tabula rasa* is “the modernist dream of the ‘true present’ that always looks to, and is in turn determined by, the blueprint of a desirable future,”

(*Provincializing Europe*, 248). However, is the supposed *tabula rasa* of Empire desired by Hardt and Negri? In some sense, yes, as they believe it is superior to all previous stages of history and historical forms of production. Likewise they would not reject postcolonialism as archaic so willing if it did not seem inapplicable to their creation of historical possibilities by reason alone.

And yet, Hardt and Negri also approach postcolonial theory's notion of history. They note that the imperial machine produces and reproduces master narratives “in order to validate and celebrate its own power,” (*Empire*, 34). While not displaying quite the same antipathy to master narratives, or History 1 as Chakrabarty puts it, one sees here a criticism of dominant historical narratives similar to the one Chakrabarty gives (*Provincializing Europe*, 50). Likewise, if Hardt and Negri believe there must be master narratives, there must also be subverted, or subversive, narratives—History 2s in Chakrabarty's terminology.

An examination of the role difference plays in Hardt and Negri's theory of Empire and in postcolonial theory is useful as a way to elucidate their different plans for action, and thus their desired ends. First, it should be said that both theories are critical of homogenization, as they have no desire for the world to become a faceless mass. Hardt makes a distinction between the plural and the fragmentary, (“The eurocentrism of history,” 249), which informs Hardt and Negri's notion of the multitude and Empire. “Empire can only isolate, divide, and segregate,” (*Empire*, 399). Thus there appears to be a paradox in the theory of Empire: on one hand Empire is said to be universal and totalizing and on the other it is understood. Perhaps one can understand this in terms of the *system* being universal and totalizing, while those *within the system* find themselves divided. However, it is undeniable that Hardt and Negri see difference as a key tool of

Empire: “Empire does not create division but rather recognizes existing or potential differences, celebrates them, and manages them within a general economy of command. The triple imperative of Empire is incorporate, differentiate, manage,” (*Empire*, 201). Thus the creation of difference is a key element to Empire's rule. It is little surprise, then, when Hardt and Negri see postcolonial theory as implicitly aligned with Empire, stating that power “has circled around to their rear to join them in the assault in the name of difference,” (*Empire*, 138). In contrast to the important role for difference they see in Empire and postcolonial theory, Hardt and Negri see in the multitude a unifying movement that will destroy Empire and move beyond it. This notion is illustrated well in their claim that the multitude is “the singular power of a *new city*,” (*Empire*, 395). In the demands for global citizenship one sees a project of unification, of the rejection of difference. Hardt and Negri explain that “the desire of the multitude is not the cosmopolitical state but a common species,” (*Empire*, 362). Essentially this is the desire to form society around commonality, or equality, rather than difference.

As mentioned earlier, postcolonial theory embraces difference because its is a counter-argument to totalizing universals, which would subsume all in positions of inferiority with respect to “Europe” and “European” reason. One of the problems with such universals is that they deny individuality, or singularity. Chakrabarty asserts that there “plural ways of being in the world,” (*Provincializing Europe*, 101). This notion is fundamental to postcolonial theory and cannot be overstressed. As such, anything that seeks *one way*, *one* solution is suspect. The theory of Empire's search for a future beyond Empire shares such a mode of thinking, in which one struggle, against global capital, will lead to liberation. However, Hardt and Negri acknowledge that “the postcolonialist insistence on difference and specificity defies the totalitarianism of universalizing

discourses and structures of power,” (*Empire*, 139), yet they say so in the context of the modern world. One must ask why cannot this critique of universalizing structures of power also apply to the postmodern world of *Empire*, whose totalizing power is such that there is no longer an outside or an Other. Perhaps the basic difference between the theory of *Empire* and postcolonial theory might be seen in Hardt and Negri's statement that “the postcolonial hero is the one who continually transgresses territorial and racial boundaries, who destroys particularisms and points toward a common civilization,” (*Empire*, 363). Thus the mobile, diasporic individual of postcolonial theory, who spans multiple cultures, is not antithetical to Hardt and Negri. It is rather that in this person they seem the destruction of difference and the creation of commonalities, while postcolonial theory would rather ascribe to this person the creation of difference and the destruction of commonalities, though it would be wrong to say that postcolonial theory does not acknowledge the inherent commonality of humanity.

Hardt and Negri seek to destroy difference as a division between people and to unite people in the struggle against *Empire*. However, their use of the word “multitude” instead of the more common “masses” is deliberate. “The multitude” implies a measure of diversity, the unification of disparate elements under a uniting goal that is not a will imposed from above but a common will promulgated from below. In contrast, “the masses” implies a homogeneous entity, whose goals are promulgated throughout the collective from above. *Theory of Empire* seeks a political revolution, in which the totalizing power of *Empire* is disposed and replaced by the productive multitude, where difference exists but does not prevent the acknowledgment of commonalities. Postcolonial theory seeks to change ideas, rather than politics, believing that a revolution in ideas of difference will lead to the most dramatic change. If people's conceptions of

universality and totality are challenged such political practices will lose their basis of support and wither away. Despite many differences both theory of Empire and postcolonial theory seek the end of oppressive, totalizing power. Globalization brings new forms of power and new possibilities of liberation yet past powers and potentials for freedom have not vanished, meaning that both critiques of power are relevant in the new system of globalization. Globalization does not render postcolonial theory irrelevant but rather challenges it to return to politics, to supplement the critique with action.