

Remote History Re-emerges: The Multitude and Stoicism

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It has always seemed paradoxical to me that philosophical historiography has oriented the alternatives towards the past: [...] it is not a discovery of the future, as science always is. Neither is the liberation of a cumbersome past worth anything if it is not carried through to the benefit of the present and to the production of the future.
—Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly*¹

‘The multitude’ is one of the buzz-words of contemporary leftist political philosophy. Although it is certainly not the first actualization of the concept, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (2000) forcefully postulates it as a postmodern, more inclusive and certainly more effective return of the proletariat.² This conceptualization is not unchallenged however. In this paper I want to look at the historico-philosophical roots of the concept in order to evaluate their specific configuration of the multitude.

In order to do this I will first flesh out Hardt and Negri’s conceptualization. *Empire* does not primarily deal with the multitude, but focuses first and foremost on what Negri and Hardt perceive as the formation of a new global geopolitical order, an apparently chaotic set of controls and representative organisations which, on closer inspection, forms a pyramidal power-structure that is composed of three progressively broader tiers—a replica of Polybius’ description of Roman government, hence the denomination ‘Empire’. At its narrow monarchic pinnacle we find the only remaining superpower, the United States, followed closely by a handful of other nation-states—roughly, those represented in the G8, which together control the primary global monetary instruments—and a handful of supranational institutions such as the WTO, NATO, and the IMF. In the second, aristocratic, tier reside transnational capitalist corporations and the general set of sovereign nation-states. The base of the pyramid is formed by the democratic-representational *comitia*—the United Nations General Assembly, religious organisations, the media, and NGOs, which together are supposed to represent the People in the global constitution. It is in this tier that, albeit indirectly, the multitude appears as the Other of the People: ‘The democratic forces that in this framework ought to constitute the active and open element of the imperial machine appear rather as corporative forces, as a set of superstitions and fundamentalisms, betraying a spirit that is conservative when not downright reactionary. [...] This limited sphere of imperial “democracy” is configured as a *People* (an organized particularity that defends established privileges and properties) rather than as a *multitude* (the universality of free and productive practices).’ (*E*, 316) It is the role of Empire to mould the multitude, via mechanisms of representation, into a People, to transcendently confiscate the ostensibly chaotic and thus ‘dangerous’ immanent force of the multitude and reconfigure (or reterritorialize) its multiplicity

into one will. Empire, Hardt and Negri write, is an apparatus of capture that lives of the vitality of the multitude.

It is in this complex 'antagonism' between Empire and its immanent antithesis that the multitude is actualised:

New figures of struggle and new subjectivities are produced in the conjecture of events, in the universal nomadism [...] They are not posed *merely against* the imperial system—they are not simply negative forces. They also express, nourish, and develop positively their own constituent projects. [...] This constituent aspect of the movement of the multitude, in its myriad faces, is really the positive terrain of the historical construction of Empire, [...] an antagonistic and creative positivity. The deterritorializing power of the multitude is the productive force that sustains Empire and at the same time the force that calls for and makes necessary its destruction. (*E*, 61)

The multitude, thus, plays a prominent part in *Empire*, and not in the least for its alleged revolutionary potential to subvert the alleged post-disciplinary societies of control, to attack post-industrial capitalist hegemony with effective weaponry. The weapons, that is, that reside, as Spinoza said, within the creative and prophetic power of the multitude, or, as Hardt and Negri say, in the productivity of the multitude. "The kind of arms in question may be contained in the potential of the multitude to destroy with its own productive force the parasitical order of postmodern command." (*E*, 65-6)

Hardt and Negri conclude their analysis with a chapter that focuses directly on the multitude and end with an optimistic outlook:

Certainly, there must be a moment when reappropriation [of wealth from capital] and self-organization [of the multitude] reach a threshold and configure a real event. This is when the political is really affirmed—when the genesis is complete and self-valorization, the cooperative convergence of subjects, and the proletarian management of production become a constituent power. [...] We do not have any models to offer for this event. Only the multitude through its practical experimentation will offer the models and determine when and how the possible becomes real. (*E*, 411)

I would say this is a rather vacuous statement, more like the confession of faith than the 'scientific' discovery of the future that Negri has professed in an earlier book. (*SA*, xxi) Nevertheless, their analysis seemed an accurate prophecy because empirical reality appeared to substantiate their intuition in the rapid growth of the anti-globalisation movement which showed its teeth in the large protests in Seattle in 1999 and Genoa in 2001. The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 seem, however, to have worked as a pivotal point with respect to this development—offering, one might cynically conclude, the dwindling Empire, in a Hobbesian fashion, the chance to defend itself against the multitude through the production of fear. This too is a realisation of a lemma from *Empire*: "The first moment of Hobbes's logic is the assumption of civil war as the originary

state of human society, a generalized conflict among individual actors. In a second moment, then, in order to guarantee survival against the mortal dangers of war, humans must agree to a pact that assigns to a leader the absolute right to act.” (*E*, 83-4)

These two ‘real events’ have become the central themes of the second book that Hardt and Negri’s co-operation has produced: *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. This book, which appeared late in 2004, is not so much a sequel as it is a reiteration from a new point of view in a new, accessible style, rid of the poststructuralist jargon that permeated the previous book. *Multitude* remains, the authors insist, despite its ubiquitous subject matter and its almost casual tone, a book of philosophy which aims to shape a conceptual ground for a political process of democratisation rather than present an answer to the question ‘what to do?’ or offer a programme for concrete action. The concept is, however, still not philologically explicated or even directly addressed. While in *Empire* it is constructed through negation (pitted against the *People*, and, as we have seen, in a complex way against Empire itself), in *Multitude* it is addressed through mediation of a host of ‘contemporary’ phenomena, most importantly the new type of postmodern war they postulate and the history of post-WWII resistance movements. It remains a rather vague concept which is assigned a revolutionary potential without much theoretical substantiation.

In earlier books, however, Negri has given closer theoretical attention to the concept. The text in which he addresses the concept for the first time is his 1981 *The Savage Anomaly*, a book on Spinoza which he has written while jailed awaiting trial for alleged terrorist activities. The concept itself does not originate in Spinoza’s work, but in Machiavelli’s *Discorsi*. It is, however, with Hobbes’s recasting of the concept as the war-disposed, disolute pole of the opposition between a Multitude and a People in *De Cive*, that Spinoza’s conceptualization seems, according to Negri, contrasted. (*SA*, 109, 140)³ It is in *The Savage Anomaly* that he describes the multitude as an unmediated, revolutionary, immanent, and positive collective social subject which can found a ‘nonmystified’ form of democracy. (*SA*, xviii, 194) It is Spinoza’s ‘demystifying’ metaphysics, he claims, which shows that ‘the history of metaphysics comprehends radical alternatives’ (*SA*, xix). ‘Spinoza’s anomaly,’ he writes, ‘the contradictory relationship between his metaphysics and the new order of capitalist production [in seventeenth-century Holland] becomes a “savage” anomaly: it is the radical expression of a historic transgression of every ordering that is not freely constituted by the masses. [...] Freedom, the true one, the whole one, which we love and which we live and die for, constitutes the world directly, immediately. Multiplicity is mediated not by law but by the constitutive process. And the constitution of freedom is always revolutionary.’ (*SA*, xix-xxi)⁴ It is revolutionary not only because it permits thought to think ‘beyond’ the tradition of bourgeois thought, but also, because it enables us in the present to construct ‘a “beyond” for the equally weary and arthritic tradition of revolutionary thought itself.’ (*SA*, xx) In that sense the concept of the multitude provides Negri with an alternative to simply studying the origins of the capitalist and bourgeois State and its crisis. (*SA*, xx) He sees it as a powerful *practical* revolutionary

politics. But even though Spinozian metaphysics, in Negri's reading, offers the potential for superseding dialectical materialism—something socialist and Soviet authors purportedly did not grasp, and it is in this sense that it can revolutionize 'old' revolutionary schemata—Negri's reading remains caught in an oppositional ('antagonistic') scheme which presents the multitude, parallel to Marx's original intention (now, Negri would say, compromised by the bourgeois mystification perfected by Hobbes-Rousseau-Hegel) as constitutive of all social and political transformation, transformation of, but this time from within, the 'bourgeois totality of domination' which is in the process of ridding itself of the mediation of State-sovereignty. (*SA*, 139-41, xxii) This description of the multitude as the postmodern reconfiguration of the proletariat is still rather implicit in *The Savage Anomaly*, but increasingly explicit in Negri's more recent texts.

It is this 'remythologizing' of the concept of multitude as a postmodern return of the 'working class' that advocates absolute democracy that is attacked by Sylvère Lotringer in the preface to Paulo Virno's *A Grammar of the Multitude*.⁵ 'This war [between Empire and the Multitude] is purely mythical, and so is the destruction of capital. That is why [Hardt and Negri's] confrontation quickly takes on an allegorical dimension, a war between *two principles*.' (*GM*, 15) This binary thinking, he contends, fails to take into regard the complexity of the contemporary reality. Lotringer aligns the thinkers as all aiming to rescue political action from its current paralysis, but distinguishes Hardt and Negri's dramatization ('The Multitude Strikes Back') sharply from Virno's more modest, searching conceptualization. (*GM*, 16) It might be a matter of generation. Whereas it seems that Virno's modesty is born from his disillusionment with the project of the Italian *Autonomia* (workers movement) in the 1970s, and thus is not yet sure how exactly this multitude can be actually imagined, the whole project of Negri (with or without Hardt) seems to stem from his positive evaluation of this movement when compared to the more orthodox Marxism that has run aground in its actual applications—notably in the Soviet Union; its violent suppression of the Hungarian revolution in 1956 caused Negri and his generation to search for alternatives in the first place. (*SA*, 8)⁶

Virno, it should be said, is no stranger to dramatization: 'Today, we are perhaps living in a new seventeenth century, or in an age in which the old categories are falling apart and we need to coin new ones.' (*GM*, 24) Or, he seems to say, return to old ones, slumbering ones. Virno returns to the seventeenth century to point, like Negri, at the polarity between a people and a multitude with 'Hobbes and Spinoza as their putative fathers.' (*GM*, 21) The multitude, he writes, is the losing term, but has survived in concealed and feeble forms since the ascend of the modern Nation State; as a dimension private (that is, deprived of public presence) in the liberal polarization of public versus private; as the presumed impotent individual in the social-democratic demarcation of the collective and individual dimensions. The fault line that brings about this new crisis of thought which brings us back to the onset of modernity is the development from the Fordist

production line (so vehemently opposed by the *Autonomía*) to the 'post-Fordist' economy in which such concepts as 'immaterial labour' are deeply affecting the way we work, think and live. It is no longer our 'horsepower' that is desired in the workspace, but our communication skills, intellect, and creativity, blurring the boundaries between 'work' and leisure. It is in this 'crisis' in which the oppositions between private and public and individual and collective are dissolving, that 'remote history can re-emerge' and we see a renewed interest in both Spinoza and his concept of the multitude. (*GM*, 23) His philosophy is after all, as Negri and Etienne Balibar both contend, a philosophy in which the notions of individuality and collectivity are similarly depolarized.⁷

Let us now look at Spinoza's conception in more detail. The multitude as *concept* only appears in the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza's last and unfinished work; it is only the term that figures throughout his work.⁸ Alexandre Matheron has claimed, however, that the appearance of the concept in the last work is only possible as a result of a theoretical foundation that is constructed in the *Ethics*. Warren Montag even maintains that as early as in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* Spinoza reaches the threshold of the concept when he implicitly acknowledges that the (fear of the) power (*potentia*) of the multitude is the limit of sovereign power (*potestas*): 'Every ruler has more to fear from his own citizens [...] then from any foreign enemy, and it is this "fear of the masses" [...] that is] the principle break on the power of the sovereign or state.'⁹ The explication of this tacit concept, however, only comes almost a decade later:

It must next be observed, that in laying foundations it is very necessary to study the human passions: and it is not enough to have shown, what ought to be done, but it ought, above all, to be shown how it can be effected, that men, whether led by passion or reason, should yet keep the laws firm and unbroken. For if the constitution of the dominion, or the public liberty depends only on the weak assistance of the laws, not only will the citizens have no security for its maintenance [...], but it will even turn to their ruin. [...] And, therefore, it would be far better for the subjects to transfer their rights absolutely to one man, than to bargain for unascertained and empty, that is unmeaning, terms of liberty, and so prepare for their posterity a way to the most cruel servitude. But if I succeed in showing that the foundation of monarchical dominion [...], are firm and cannot be plucked up, *without the indignation of the larger part of an armed multitude*, and that from them follow peace and security for king and multitude, and if I deduce this from general human nature, no one will be able to doubt, that these foundations are the best and the true ones.¹⁰

The concept of the multitude resolves the tension that scholars have observed in Spinoza's political project between the insistence on the benign function of sovereignty (as witnessed in the quotation above) and the insistence on individual freedom.¹¹ It is, we see here, a truly revolutionary concept, and it is not difficult to see why Spinoza's contemporaries (and, as Balibar and Montag imply, possibly even Spinoza himself) saw it as a dangerous political idea. In addition to it being a dissolute and anarchist concept, Montag describes why it is still regarded dangerous today:

The multitude as a concept [...] is neither an individual in the meaning that the dominant juridical anthropology assigns to the term, nor *the* collective, *the* community, *the* people having legally constituted themselves as a juridical entity [...] Rather, emerging precisely out of Spinoza's critique of the constitutive function of law [...] and his insistence that right equals power, the multitude calls into question the conceptual antinomies of [the still thriving liberal tradition] that began with [...] Hugo Grotius and Hobbes.¹²

The multitude, Montag's point is, has no juridical legitimation or political form: 'it is that excess or remainder that is irreducible to the antinomies of legal and political thought, overdetermining both political theory and practice, the permanent excess of force over law, and a force that no state can monopolize.'¹³

Spinoza's 'anti-legalism', as Deleuze called it¹⁴ (which he himself, at the end of the *Political Treatise*, appears to revoke¹⁵), and 'anti-politics' seems to be inspired by Stoicism, often identified as one of the philosophical sources that have been of prime influence on his thought.¹⁶ His concept of the multitude, strikingly reverberates Cicero's rendering of Stoic thought in *De Officiis*:

Those who in a free state deliberately put themselves in a position to be feared are the maddest of the mad. For let the laws be never so much overborne by some one individual's power, let the spirit of freedom be never so intimidated, still sooner or later [the subjects] assert themselves [...] Furthermore, those who wish to be feared must inevitably be afraid of those whom they intimidate. [...] And we recently discovered, if it was not known before, that no amount of power can withstand the hatred of the many.¹⁷

The inferred anti-legalism and anti-politics of Stoicism seems to attract a renewed interest in contemporary political thought. Thomas L. Pangle points to several examples, such as the growing influence of non-governmental organizations (with no official legal or political status), scholarly discussions on a global civil society, as exemplified by Jack Derrida's cosmopolitan manifest and Martha Nussbaum's call for a new cosmopolitan civic education.¹⁸ These practices and theories, apparently in line with Stoic political teachings, call for a 'supra-national ethic and conscience' that is 'articulated and enforced less by positive international law, less by diplomacy among states or within permanent international organizations such as the United Nations or the World Court' but instead 'by a more cross-cultural public opinion, inspired and led by philosophers or sages and educational leaders.'¹⁹

These developments indeed echo the views of many Stoics, among which, most importantly, the early Stoic Chrysippus and the late Stoic Epictetus. Their views hold that in the ideal state there would be no need for government or magistrates.²⁰ In fact there would not be a state, because the ideal stoic republic would transcend political boundaries to include all who have achieved stoic wisdom, regardless of their location.²¹ All 'good men' from various parts of the

world would be bound together by their inclination to follow reason. Natural law would suffice and no additional rules are needed, nor are leaders. Providence determines what happens, not politicians. Chrysippus went so far as to state that Stoicism forbids political attachments.²²

We should not forget, however, that Stoicism incorporates many other views on politics, even within the supposedly paradigmatic periods in which the school has traditionally been divided. Malcolm Scholfield has argued that the early Stoic Zeno might have had a much more practical political outlook than Chrysippus' depoliticized idealism.²³ Also within the so called late Stoic period there is a diversity of outlooks on politics.²⁴ I wish to draw attention, however, to the middle period (often forgotten when discussing Stoic politics) in which a very distinct idea on politics develops under the influence of Panaetius. Opposing Chrysippus' prohibition he advances an idea of mixed government with checks and balances designed to effect an equilibrium of power between the monarch, the aristocracy and the people. It seems that this model is not only advanced while awaiting the non-political ideal republic of Chrysippus but rather straightforwardly promoted as the best regime.²⁵ Via Polybius this idea of mixed government has inspired, as Hardt and Negri describe²⁶, the American constitution and thus Stoic thought also exerts its influence on contemporary political thought in a way very different from the 'anti-political' and 'anti-legalist' orientation it also inspires. It even lies at the foundation of Hardt and Negri's own blueprint of Empire, the 'enemy' of the Multitude.

If we reread Cicero's comments on the power of the many in *De Officiis* we could argue that the idea of the multitude as it is presented there as a positive corrective power of the sovereign, is in fact very close to the idea of mixed government. So the multitude, as a dissolute power, is both an integral part of the empirical constellation *and* its excess that is irreducible to it. It is both political and anti-political, at the same time juridical and anti-juridical. This makes it a powerful concept which can simultaneously establish 'peace and security' for subjects from within existing political and legal structures, and criticize and transform these political and legal structures. This points towards an 'minoritarian' engagement with the political and legal order, changing it, without ever becoming this order—in other words, a becoming-minor of the multitude.²⁷

We should therefore be wary of the binarism on which Hardt and Negri construct their embodiment of the multitude. Rather than ultimately striving to overturn the empirical organization of contemporary political (and economical/social) reality, the multitude should work towards 'democratizing' this configuration. Becoming is not a goal, but always 'in the middle'. With the destruction of Empire, we might be left with nothing, exactly because the multitude is a liminal concept. So we should thread carefully, with the Stoic conception of self-preservation in mind. The famous ethics of the 'care of the self' might thus be the necessary corrective for Hardt and Negri's 'dangerous' conceptualization. It is ironically the 'ultimate philosophy of the self' gives the necessary counterweight to the 'ultimate concept sociability'.

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- ¹ 'The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics', trans. by Michael Hardt (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. xxi, hereafter cited in the text as *SA*.
- ² (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), hereafter cited in the text as *E*. For the discussion of this book I have used parts of an earlier, unfinished paper on the multitude, which has been used to write the wikipedia-entry on *Multitude: War and Peace in the Age of Empire*.
- ³ Paul Oskar Kristeller however claims that Spinoza's political writings also directly echo Machiavelli's work. 'Stoic and Neoplatonic Sources of Spinoza's Ethics', *History of European Ideas*, 5:1 (1984), 1-15 (p. 2).
- ⁴ Hardt, in his translators foreword, explains the constitutive process as a process 'whereby social norms and right are constructed from the base of society through a logic of immediate, collective, and associative relations.' (*SA*, p. vx)
- ⁵ trans. by Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (Los Angeles and New York: Semiotexte, 2004), hereafter cited in the text as *GM*. <<http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcmultitude3.htm>> [accessed 23/12/06].
- ⁶ Cf. Nicholas Thoburn, 'Autonomous Production? On Negri's "New Synthesis"', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 18:5 (2001), 75-96.
- ⁷ Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 122.
- ⁸ Warren Montag, 'Who's Afraid of the Multitude? Between the Individual and the State', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 104:4 (2005), 655-673 (p. 671n2). The following statement on Matheron is also taken from this footnote.
- ⁹ Montag, p. 658.
- ¹⁰ Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, VII-2, my italics. <http://www.constitution.org/bs/poltr_07.htm#002> [accessed 9 February 2007]
- ¹¹ Cf. Gatens and Lloyd, p. 67.
- ¹² Montag, p. 663, punctuation changed.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 663.
- ¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, 'Preface to *The Savage Anomaly*', in *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975-1995* ed. by David Lapoujade, trans. by Amy Hodges and Mike Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), p. 190-3 (p. 190-1).
- ¹⁵ Cf. Montag, p. 666-7.
- ¹⁶ See, for instance, 'Stoic and Neoplatonic Sources of Spinoza's Ethics', *History of European Ideas*, 5:1 (1984): 1-15.
- ¹⁷ Trans. by Walter Miller, Loeb edn. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1913), Book II, vii, 24-23, order changed. <http://www.constitution.org/rom/de_officiis.htm#book2> [accessed 10 February 2007]
- ¹⁸ 'Socratic Cosmopolitanism: Cicero's Critique and Transformation of the Stoic Ideal', *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique*, 31:2 (1989), 235-262 (pp. 235-8).
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 235-6.
- ²⁰ Francis Edward Devine, 'Stoicism on the Best Regime', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 31:3 (1970), 323-336 (p. 325).
- ²¹ Ibid., pp. 324-5.
- ²² Ibid., p. 327.
- ²³ Cf. review of *The Stoic Idea of the City*, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* <<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/1992/03.03.13.html>> [accessed 10 February 2007]
- ²⁴ Devine, p. p. 332.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 332.
- ²⁶ Cf. *Empire*, pp. 163-6.
- ²⁷ Cf. Timothy Rayner, 'Refiguring the Multitude: From Exodus to the Production of Norms', *Radical Philosophy*, 131 (2005), 28-38 (p. 36).