

The Common.

Commonwealth, Hardt, M. and Negri, A. Harvard University Press, 448 pages, (2009)

Has this notion of the common still got any mileage left in it, or is it perhaps capable of becoming a threshold concept, an idea that has the capacity to make people see things differently, and in a way that can provide a critique of contemporary social and economic life? Where else does one encounter the notion? We talk about, for instance, the common good; common sense; common wealth; common land and, of course, from within one religious tradition, Common Prayer. As with a number of terms though, they are as much aspirational as descriptive. People do not behave as if they acknowledged there is a common good, or even with anything approaching common sense. Common land is largely a thing of the past, and Common Prayer has been undermined by the changing attitudes towards authority in the Christian tradition to the point where it is almost impossible to establish clear and agreed patterns of worship. From time to time, and most normally in emergencies where people realise it is in all their interests to “pull together” and pool resources, the concept re-emerges and one can see evidence that individuals are prepared to look beyond themselves and work towards some greater good. Organisations strive to create some sense of working towards a common purpose in order to elicit loyalty and a coherent commitment, so they produce mission statements and shared aims and objectives. But the fact that they have to do this suggests that, most of the time, the opposite is likely to be the case. We cooperate only when it is in our personal (or family) interests to do so. The rest of the time it is “every man for himself”!

It is against this background that we offer a critical review of Hardt and Negri’s third volume in their series on a new political order, entitled simply “Commonwealth”, and ask whether their ideas do have some purchase on practical economics and politics, or whether it is so idealistic as to be of limited use. In particular, in the midst of the so-called Global Financial Crisis, and proposals to reform such things as the banking and financial sector, we need to examine whether their ideas have anything useful to offer.

Before looking at Hardt and Negri in greater detail though, it is important to be clear about what their book is not. It is not yet another text from

within the Liberal or Social Democratic fold that is commending enhanced levels of cooperation. I was reminded of a book that I bought 20 years ago, one written in the face of and in reaction to Thatcherism; *The Common Good: Citizenship, Morality and Self Interest*, by Bill Jordan, Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1989. Jordan says:

I have argued that the concept of a good society only makes sense in terms of a shared common good, and that this in turn depends on all the members of society having common interests in aspects of their lives together (Jordan, 1989, P85)

He then goes on to identify the characteristics of such a society:

- The common good is actively created by citizens sharing together in some shared process
- The common good is qualitative rather than simply quantitative
- The common good is purposeful, and the means of adopting it must be adapted over time
- The common good requires power to be used to structure interests and distribute assets, so as to create conditions for active participation and self rule.

All of this is fine in its way, but its starting point is very different from that of Hardt and Negri and presupposes that the best one can do, and therefore what one should be aiming for, is a convergence of self interest to the point where shared objectives can be established from time to time. There is not much doubt that this is the reality of most Western capitalist societies where individual self interest appears to be the determining factor and the best one can hope for is to bring these together enough to construct some sense of shared purpose, under particular circumstances. This is very definitely NOT what Hardt and Negri are commending.

Hardt and Negri come from a radical Marxist stable, but have developed their ideas in conversation with more contemporary forms of philosophical and sociological analysis, thus leaving behind or even alienating more orthodox Marxists. They wish to take us back to more basic understandings of “the common” in order to construct an alternative political order. The common wealth used to be understood as the resources of the natural world, available for the benefit of all. Thus the air that we breathe, the water we drink, the fruits of the earth and the beauty of the natural world, were the original “common wealth” to which everybody should have free and equal access. This now needs to be

expanded in the light of technological and social advances and should include such things as language itself, knowledge produced along with codes, information, and all the affects of the revolution in information technology. What is under question here is the very concept of private property, that mainstay of all liberal political cultures. The common, according to Hardt and Negri, should not be privatized and made accessible only to the few on the basis of money and power. Neither capitalism nor socialism is capable of attaining this level of radical action or political organization.

It is hard to see many people being prepared to go this far and abandoning the concept of private property, but this is what lies at the heart of their approach. One could be tempted to dismiss the rest of their work as totally idealistic and far too radical to be worth considering from this point onwards. This is just a “non-starter” in the real political order and one might as well close the book now and return to more familiar and comfortable notions of self interest and cooperation. I would make two points though. First, early Christian communities did espouse such a philosophy of holding all things in common, so daft as this may sound, it does have some sort of religious heritage and should not perhaps be dismissed out of hand. Second, it may still be fruitful to see where Hardt and Negri’s arguments take us, even if their starting point does seem so “off the wall”. If there are to be threshold concepts which enable us to see the world differently, the chances are that they are going to be uncomfortable and challenging. So better to read further just in case there are things to be learnt.

Somewhat like myself, Hardt and Negri have a penchant for dead French philosophers, notably in this case, Foucault and Deleuze, and they use their ideas to develop the argument about common wealth. What they are pursuing is the possibility of a new space within which politics can be constructed afresh. This needs to happen in recognition that, following Foucault, what we are now experiencing is a state of biopolitical production. In other words, we have moved beyond the form of capitalism where what is produced are things, physical products such as consumer goods. We have even moved beyond the stage where what is produced is knowledge and information, although certainly this is an aspect of contemporary capitalist culture. What is being produced now are bodies and subjectivities – new and different forms of what it is to be and to become a human being. It is ourselves who are the objects of production as we seek to re-shape both physical and psychological characteristics in order to function in this latest stage of capitalism.

This needs arguing for and examples given, but one can see elements of this without too much difficulty. The manipulation of the human body through fashion let alone plastic surgery is a feature of contemporary culture, but that is only the obvious external manifestation of what Hardt and Negri mean. Handling our emotions through counselling would be a clear psychological parallel. But it needs to be acknowledged that the commercial world has taken on a similar hue as employees are put through various training programmes on customer care, self awareness, motivational learning, cultural responsiveness and so on. We are the products who need to be shaped appropriately in order to function efficiently in this environment, and we are also the consumers who are being encouraged to present ourselves to others in different and creative ways in order to be attractive and successful. Hence what was private and personal is now public and commercial.

Foucault argues that bodies have to resist in order to exist. One could suggest that an extreme example of this is current terrorist activity where the only way for small groups to oppose the might of powerful Western nations is by turning people into suicide bombers and using their bodies as weapons. This in contrast to the highly technical means of warfare operated from a great distance or great height through targeted bombs and missiles. Religions also use disciplinary regimes – ways of telling people how to use and control their bodies – as means of order and control, although in this they make bodies “disappear” by making them subject to transcendent forms. Hardt and Negri believe that economism operates as a similar form of fundamentalism by focussing on the quantity of economic values that stands behind bodies. So individual bodies again disappear behind this mask of an economic value which becomes another sort of transcendent frame of reference. People become commodities and begin to see themselves as such, products to be marketed and promoted as either specialized products or with transferable skills. We have to be able to “sell ourselves” through convincing CVs or good interview techniques. But it is here that the fault lines exist and the battle lines are drawn between those who thrive under these conditions and those who lose out.

Hardt and Negri link these ideas back to the earlier books in their series where they present the notion of the multitude as the new vanguard for revolutionary activity. The multitude is the “part who have no part”, the party of the poor, or those who have no right to be counted according to current power regimes. The multitude is a form of political organization that both emphasizes the multiplicity of the social singularities in their struggles and seeks to coordinate their common actions and maintain

equality between individual actors. What emerges from this process is a new truth, new ways of being and new subjectivities. So will be created a new biopolitical reason which: puts rationality at the service of life; technique at the service of ecological needs; and the accumulation of wealth at the service of the common.

All of this takes us off into the rarified realms of Hardt and Negri's own specialized discourse, but it is important to see where the idea of the common fits into this intellectual structure. What I want to do is to earth this by coming back to the question of if and how this helps us analyse and seek answers to the current global financial crisis. Since the book was written as the crisis was getting underway, it is a subject that they attempt to address. As they move to consider this issue of finance capital, they make it clear that they will neither celebrate nor condemn this aspect of capitalism, but wish to track down the spectres of the common that lurk there.

They suggest that finance capital is, in essence, an elaborate machine for representing the common, i.e. the common relationships and networks necessary for the production of a specific commodity, or some asset or phenomenon. This is a process of abstraction and is perhaps why mathematical models are now so central to much economic theory. "Finance grasps the common in its broadest social form and, through abstraction, expresses it as a value that can be exchanged, mystifying and privatising the common in order to generate profits". It has to be said that many attempts to quantify or put a clear monetary value on the so-called externalities that are part of economic life – informal networks of trust and exchange of ideas, let alone the information and ideas now central to biopolitical production – simply miss the mark. The spectres of the common lurk behind the complex economic models that are now presented.

Whilst one can begin to see what Hardt and Negri are driving at, we still need to ask how this can inform responses to the practical challenges of the current crisis and what it has to say to the question of how things should now be done differently.

So let us compare the supposed lack of realism of Hardt and Negri with the proposals on how to counter the current financial crisis. The one thing that has struck me since this began is that there is no real viable alternative to the crisis on offer. It is easy enough to elicit potential explanations for and analyses of what has gone wrong, but once one asks

the vital question “so what should happen now?” the most one gets is a degree of uncertainty and hesitant suggestions that some things are going to have to change. One could argue that there is no obvious way forward using conventional means and assumptions and that there is a deadlock emerging. Hardt and Negri suggest that capitalism is in a state where it cannot increase levels of production and wealth, but only bring about redistributions in favour of the already rich and powerful. Each successive crisis is a mechanism for that redistribution, with sectors of production going into liquidation or being appropriated by the larger organisations, and sections of the working population either losing their jobs or being forced to take work which pays less than their previous employment. In that way, the system struggles on, but only as far as the next crisis where the same pattern is reproduced.

Is this borne out by the evidence, because, if it is, then Hardt and Negri may be the ones who have a realistic grasp of the situation. Certainly, if one takes the UK as an example, much of what they argue appears to be the case. Even at the beginning of 2010, when figures show that the recession has come to an end with a small percentage point of growth in evidence, economic commentators are warning that any recovery is going to be slow, uneven and painful. A proportion of the productive base in the country has been wiped out and it is not obvious to see where the new growth is going to come from. With credit still tight it is not easy for new businesses to get established, and established ones are finding it hard to borrow in order to fund future projects. There may yet be a “double dip” recession, as firms no longer able to afford to hold onto staff in the hope of an immediate improvement, embark on a new round of redundancies. Inflation is starting to creep up again as food and fuel prices increase, putting further pressure on already fragile consumer spending. It is likely then that levels of unemployment will remain high for some time to come.

In the meantime the debates rage about how to reorganise the banking system and what to do about the bonus culture. Investment bankers point out that they were not the cause of this crisis so they are not the ones to be penalised, but ordinary people remain unconvinced by this and want to see someone take the blame and share the pain for the problems they face. What one sees is a series of dilemmas. If action is taken to split up the banks, as some suggest, then unless there is global agreement on this, the businesses will simply shift to somewhere more amenable to their operations. Tax revenues from the City of London are likely to fall and this would further damage public finances. If no action is taken however, there is a danger that the crisis will be repeated and government will be

accused of colluding with the banking system. Then there is the vexed issue of how soon and how deep cuts in public spending should be implemented. Too late and the cost of borrowing for the UK could go up. Too soon and the country could be plunged back into recession before new growth has even begun. Similarly with tax rises – the money borrowed must be seen to be clawed back as soon as possible, but further restraints on consumer spending and confidence will itself hamper any recovery. It is not surprising that the main political parties either hedge their bets or make promises they know they will not be expected to keep. There is no obvious way forward in terms of internal economic policy, and the real hope is the development of lucrative overseas export markets as the developing nations of China, India, Russia and Brazil – hopefully – have a much more steady and even movement out of recession. But then, if there is little capacity left for investment and new production, how can the UK be in a position to reap the benefits of this?

And so the picture unfolds of a system that has run out of steam and where business as usual looks increasingly unlikely to be resumed. In the meantime, the more liberally inclined reformists point to the opportunities to invest in green technologies, public infrastructure, and encourage more sustainable levels of consumption and debt, but without any suggestions as to how these are going to be funded in the new regime. Are these ideas any more or less idealistic than those of Hardt and Negri? The critics of turbo capitalism bemoan the previous regime but still want to spend the same levels of funds on their own projects. So there is deadlock and no serious consensus on ways forward.

A possible conclusion then is that there is little to choose between the idealistic aspirational writing of Hardt and Negri and the more pragmatic and realist views of the economic and political establishment. The latter appear to have no agreed solutions or to offer any great cause for optimism. Both sides do agree on the general theory of economic cycles though, Hardt and Negri drawing on the work of Arrighi. His argument was that such cycles have to be seen in a much longer time frame, and that the financialisation of major economies is often the final stage of their development before the transition to a radically new situation. It is precisely this that characterizes the current context, with finance and banking having taken the place of traditional industrial production in the major Western economies. Perhaps it is the case that we are witnessing a global shift of economic power towards the developing economies and that the next phase will see this taking a firm hold. But perhaps this merely begins yet another long term cycle of the capitalist saga in which some fare better than others, and those on the downturn have to adapt to a

much worse situation. There will be political and social consequences for those on the wrong end of these developments, but played out in the context of individual nations and their specific problems. None of this is exactly good news for the UK I would suggest.

In which case, rather than just repeating the same old patterns, why not be more radical and consider interpreting matters in a more radical fashion? Why not try to work out how Hardt and Negri might have something to offer through their use of the concept of the common, and to see market forces and private property as the aberrations rather than ideas of the common and future developments of human subjectivity as the oddities? Why not link these ideas to some of the understanding from within religious traditions and use them as a source of critique of an economic culture that feels increasingly like a dead end? Such an approach cannot be more sterile than the constant bickering of establishment politicians and economists who appear unable to exercise imagination and to begin to see the world differently. A new world, a new creation, and a new truth might not be such a bad idea after all!