Immanent Miracles: From De Sica to Hardt and Negri

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Philosophy is revealed not by good sense but by paradox. Paradox is the pathos or the passion of philosophy.

—Gilles Deleuze

Miracle as a Form of Life

In an age of cynical reason, it is no doubt an embarrassment, if still at times a necessity, merely to speak of miracles or, as Alain Badiou does, of secularized grace. Carl Schmitt has argued that the significance of the concept of miracle consists in its analogous relation to the sovereign’s decisive call for the state of emergency in a secular world. Giorgio Agamben furthermore makes the point that the state of emergency now has become the norm, perhaps suggesting that we have been deprived of even the logical possibility of immanent miracles. What seems to be at risk from the attacks of “realist” cynicism or pessimism, in other words, is less the idea of a divine intervention than the potential for a lasting alteration of conventional political practices. In what follows, I will argue that this prospect, which Agamben appears to imply has been foreclosed entirely, becomes most apparent in forms of life that embody resistance to sovereign power, thus giving an improbable justification for political faith or optimism.

Yet as a semiotic structure, as Eric Santner recently has observed, the miracle seems to resist its obsolescence against all odds, and its paradoxical survival raises the prospect that we may be living in a
post-secular moment. Such a time would be more, rather than less, favorable to a broadening of our ethical and political imaginative horizons. Our ability to take the miraculous seriously would represent, then, a measure of our capacity for resonance and refraction, for the activities of a mode of thought that is not afraid to question the defensiveness of secularism and thus the status quo.

In readings of works by Rosenzweig, Benjamin, and Kafka, Santner brings to light an idea of the miracle that, contra Schmitt, persists in modernity as a suspension of the state of emergency that has become the inescapable political norm. Benjamin’s concept of awakening as the opening of a space of new possibilities in ethical and political life is exemplary in this regard. With such reasoning in mind, Santner claims that, in the course of our confronting the symptomatic ailments of modern life, “miracles happen when, upon registering their ‘historical truth,’ we are able to act, to intervene into these symptoms and open the space of possibility thereby. . . . Miracles happen when we find ourselves able to suspend a pattern . . . whereby one ‘culpabilizes’ the Other or, in more Nietzschean terms, cultivates ressentiment, with respect to a fundamental dysfunction or crisis within social reality.”

Santner’s definition of modern miracles may be refined if we take the position that nowadays the truly miraculous consists not only in events that momentarily intervene in or suspend the biopolitical automatism of contemporary society but also in forms of life that embody full-blown resistance to it. These forms of life emerge most fully on a plane of immanence in which grammar and conduct imply each other. A politics based on forms of life must focus not on the aesthetics or stylistics of existence but rather on cultural practices that, in constant transformation, manage to avoid the aporiai of a politics based on supposedly universal concepts of community or individualism. Finally, speaking of forms of life allows us to re-integrate ethics—in its relational version and no longer imagined as produced by the juridical order—in the space of politics. The concept is obviously a legacy of a long philosophical tradition that runs from the Hellenistic and Roman period to Foucault and Wittgenstein.

On this view, salvation happens as the byproduct of a miraculous form of life. This conviction, it seems to me, is at the core of two genealogically related works revolving around the phenomenology of immanent miracles: Vittorio De Sica’s Miracle in Milan (1951) and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s Empire (2000). In what follows, I will argue that to speak of “immanent miracles” in the context of these works is not to espouse what Schmitt called the “theological
derailment” of the political but rather to name a different horizon of political philosophy.11 This alternative perspective would be interested less in determining the conditions and limits of action than in exploring the indefinite potentialities of political change and transformation. We might best approach such a prospect not by re-treading the well-worn paths of skeptical doubt but rather by way of the Foucaultian critique of power and Deleuzean faith in the world.12 Indeed, the depictions of communal forms of life in both Miracle in Milan and Empire (and in Multitude, Hardt and Negri’s sequel to Empire) give expression to an intuition that deepens the meaning of the syllogism formulated by Deleuze in reading Foucault: “Life becomes resistance to power when power takes life as its object.”13

Not coincidentally, Hardt and Negri invoke De Sica’s film as a model of political argument in their own critique of power. Miracle in Milan centers on a community of the homeless inhabiting a shantytown on the outskirts of Milan. These derelict individuals have been banished from the body politic and consigned to a strictly biological existence, exemplifying the paradoxical state of “inclusive exclusion” from the polis (or, in other words, the condition of merely physical bodies without rights) that Agamben identifies with the bare life of subjection to sovereign power. They thus represent what he would call homines sacres.14 Yet even before experiencing the supernatural miracle evoked in the film’s title, they manage to renounce resentment and to achieve a state of bliss, at least for a while, outside the normal, institutional structures of capitalist society. Indeed, the most crucial position that Miracle in Milan shares with Empire is the refusal to admit labor as the determining signifier of social and political identity. In the film, this miraculous form of life occurs in overt contrast to the phenomenon generally referred to as “the economic miracle” of Italy, the post-World War II period of steady economic growth that began in the early 1950s and peaked in the late 1950s and early 1960s.15 What is at stake in the insistence of both Miracle in Milan and Empire on the inherent dignity of the most impoverished modes of being is the possibility of locating a politics of resistance in the sphere of immanence, on an ontological rather than economic basis.16

On a related note, readers have remarked that perhaps the most original insight in Empire is its contention that the social and political upheavals of the 1960s created globalization from below.17 Enlarging on Mario Tronti’s workerist theory, Hardt and Negri argue that capitalism responded to these struggles by appropriating the most innovative strategies of resistance. Precisely in order to expose the
capitalist aim of co-opting labor’s productive energies, workerism affirms the worker’s autonomy from capital and the refusal of work as a means of resistance. Along these lines, Negri throughout his career redefines the political task as the overturning of the customary social principles: in this sense, the rejection of work is central. However, it has yet to be noted that the political inheritance of the book, which certainly can be traced back through three decades of Negri’s writings to the workerism of the 1960s, furthermore shares some of its essential characteristics with the outlook of Italian neorealist cinema. If 1968 is the watershed in the political economy of Empire and its view of history, the book’s main concepts—from the emergence of the multitude to the notion of an immanent event—already are present at a prior moment in Italian culture in the movement of neorealism. To begin to understand the critical kinship that links Miracle in Milan and Empire, we first should examine the philosophical itinerary that brings Hardt and Negri from a mood of optimism to the condition of faith in immanent miracles.

The Best of All Possible Political Worlds

After Nietzsche’s critique of metaphysics, Freud’s undercutting of morality and civilization, and the Frankfurt School’s indictment of culture, optimism may not seem like a credible position. In the political realm, it certainly appears that pessimism is the only suitable attitude. Carl Schmitt advances just such a dour claim in The Concept of the Political on the ground that politics is defined by the possibility of enmity. Accordingly, Hardt and Negri’s particular strain of optimism in Empire has led many critics to denounce their argument as a political fairy tale. Timothy Brennan, for example, gives his review of the book the scathingly sarcastic title “The Empire’s New Clothes.”

Perhaps the most cogent advocate of the pessimist mentality is Antonio Gramsci. In a fragment of Prison Notebook 9 (1932) titled, “Past and Present: On Dreaming with Your Eyes Open and Fantasizing,” Gramsci rebukes those who believe that what he calls “a fact”—meaning a change in the social structure—already has taken place. For such individuals, he asserts, the “mechanism of necessity” has been overturned, and therefore everything is easy. One can achieve what one wants, and one wants an entire series of things we are presently missing. At bottom, what we are dealing with is the present turned upside-down and projected into the future. . . .
It is necessary instead to attract attention to the present as it is, if we want to transform it. Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will.\textsuperscript{21}

Gramsci’s stoic \textit{parola d’ordine}, or slogan, leaves no doubt that the ontological mode of his philosophy is pessimistic.\textsuperscript{22} His credo helps to take measure of the radical gulf separating Gramsci from Negri, for Negri makes clear that he will settle for nothing less than an “optimism of reason.”\textsuperscript{23} In Gramsci’s theory, it is the party that represents the new or modern prince, the reservoir of the political will that holds a transformative potential for collective action.\textsuperscript{24} To assign the decisive conceptual role to an abstract idea of the party, however, may mean neglecting alternative forms of life, such as excluded, disenfranchised, or dissident singularities, in favor of a transcendental concept that has failed to alter the course of history in a significant way.

Not surprisingly, some readers have disparaged Hardt and Negri for presuming the revolution’s achieved state, the occurrence of the fact that simplifies everything.\textsuperscript{25} On a similar note, Gramsci views the hope for a “turning upside-down of the present” or, to adopt Foucault’s terminology, “strategic reversibility” as an illusion and a sign of passivity. The point of reference offered by Foucault, however, usefully brings into focus the relational dimensions of power, which he compellingly suggests in \textit{La volonté de savoir} are not inevitably determined by juridical or economic conditions but rather respond to strategic contingencies and thus are subject to reversibility.\textsuperscript{26} Commending this theory, Deleuze observes that Foucault’s thinking does not deny class struggle but rather “illustrates it in a completely different way,” that is to say, with the implication that resistance consists not in reacting to (and thus accepting) the practices of domination but rather in turning the strategic, immanent, and diffuse nature of power relations to emancipatory purposes.\textsuperscript{27} On this view, it may be replied to a pessimist such as Gramsci that utter confidence in the irreversibility of necessity may help enforce the automatisms of capital, which mere will is incapable of rethinking. His prohibition against what he calls “fantasizing” may result in blindness to the biopolitical potential of the multitude.

Critical pessimism, in other words, risks its own sort of self-indulgence. This risk is especially pronounced, as Negri observes in \textit{Subversive Spinoza}, when contaminated with postmodern skepticism:

It certainly cannot be said that these philosophies of the postmodern (from Lyotard to Baudrillard, from Rorty to Vattimo) do not perceive the essential qualities of the phenomenology of our time. But all these versions, without
exception, present to us, along with the sacrosanct narrative of the end of transcendentalism, a senseless spectacle of what remains after its death. It is a sort of apology of resignation for a half-amused, half-pitiful disengagement that settles down at the edge of cynicism.28

Although he reserves sharp scorn here for the “postmodern,” Negri’s disagreement with Gramsci in fact offers the clearest picture of what he means by “resignation.” Hardt and Negri approach what Gramsci calls Machiavelli’s “living book” from a very different perspective than that of the Sardinian critic.29 According to the authors of Empire, Machiavelli’s The Prince ought to be considered a “revolutionary political manifesto” that nonetheless posits a problematic, ineluctable distance between the subject (the multitude) and the object (the Prince and the Free State) (E 63). Gramsci is of little help on this score, since he proposes a binarism of the party and the collective will that merely recapitulates the dichotomy.

Hardt and Negri instead clearly suggest that the gap may be bridged by something like Negri’s optimism of reason. They insist, “as the democratic Machiavelli tells us, [on] the power of generation, desire, and love” (E 388), on a biopolitical vitalism according to which the multitude opposes Empire with “no mediation” (E 393). Such a mode of optimism should not be taken to affirm the Hegelian view that what is real is rational and what is rational is real. Rather, Hardt and Negri may be situated in a genealogy that proceeds from Spinoza to Deleuze and Guattari and upholds a faith in the immanent link between humans and the world. Such a stance accords with the belief in ontological blessedness that is articulated in Proposition 21 of Spinoza’s Ethics: “Nobody can desire to be happy to do well and to live well without at the same time desiring to be, to do, and to live; that is, actually to exist.”30 And like the Spinoza of the Political Treatise, Hardt and Negri appear to be convinced that human beings can live in harmony.31

The specific optimism that informs Empire may be said to serve the purpose of a political theodicy, which is to say a rationale for why the current historical conditions are the most conducive to realizing an immanent, transformative event. Not surprisingly, readers often have cast the book’s authors in the role of credulous Candides.32 Yet unlike Leibniz’s Theodicy, Empire gives voice not only to a justification of the political opportunity that the contemporary state of things represents but also to a reminder that salvation is indeed a necessity, albeit not in a transcendental sense (E 533).33 Hardt and Negri look forward to a political horizon that will come into being only with the arrival
of what they enigmatically refer to as “the event,” when the potentialities of the multitude will be realized. They thus refer the idea of the event, which manifests a vital attitude of love alternately derived from Machiavelli and (as we shall see) Spinoza, to the emergence of those forms of life that reject or call into question the automatism of sovereignty and that I have been proposing may be associated with the miraculous. With regard to the problem of explicating the immanent miracle of the event, however, their thinking encounters its own limit or at least its own threshold. Early in Empire, the authors define philosophy as “praxis applied to the event” (E 49). At the end of the book, the question remains open how to pursue the “practice of the event” (E 386), while yet awaiting the arrival of a “real event”: “Certainly there must be a moment when re-appropriation and self-organization reach a threshold and configure a real event. . . . The only event we are still awaiting is the construction or rather the insurgence of a powerful organization. We do not have any model to offer for this event” (E 411).

What is striking about this passage is its emphasis on “the insurgence of a powerful organization,” as the book does not advocate any particular means of organizing the multitude and, in fact, treats political parties and labor unions as outmoded relics of the past. Indeed, the refusal of conventional affiliations appears to substitute for organization in Empire. More probably, the “powerful organization,” as Multitude seems to imply, coincides with resistant forms of life. At any rate, the elusive notion of the event, which is a recurring topic in modern and contemporary philosophy from Heidegger to Deleuze and Badiou, is particularly puzzling in the immanent order imagined by Hardt and Negri. As no individual or collective act of will nor any telos is identified in Empire as a means of surmounting the distance between the present and the future, we are left in a position to conceive of the event only as a re-description of the miracle in a post-secular world. In other words, because the event that Hardt and Negri propose in Empire has no model and defies the prevailing institutional order imposed on our existence, no other concept than that of the miracle adequately encompasses all the dimensions of this event.

Although it is important to criticize Hardt and Negri for the limits of their discussions of emigration, colonialism, and immaterial labor, it is equally necessary to recognize their achievement. The authors compellingly define the first task of politics today as believing in the world, which not by chance looms large on the cover of the book. We
might say that the issue for Hardt and Negri is no longer, as it was for Marx in the eleventh of his “Theses on Feuerbach,” how to change the world instead of interpreting it; rather, the most urgent challenge that the authors confront in Empire is how to restore belief in the world and hence in politics. Political faith for them does not coincide with the search for another world but in establishing the right link between human beings and this world, that is, between love and life.

Their position derives in important ways from the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, where a related concern for immanence can be found. In Anti-Oedipus and A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari insist on an optimistic, Spinozist politics that is free of the shackles of the negative psychoanalytic imaginary. Such a standpoint refuses such notions as transcendence, the law, the father, etc. in favor of the terms of a political unconscious that, in its immanence, no longer needs to refer to Oedipus or to a theatrical scene of desire. On this view, the unconscious is a productive machine that is engaged in a process of immanent becoming.

Hardt and Negri imagine that Empire, which stands over the multitude as a mere “apparatus of capture,” to invoke the language of A Thousand Plateaus, might convert in the manner of a Gestalt switch into the empire of the multitude as seen from below, the empire of the multitude’s productivity and creativity (E 62). It is noteworthy in this regard that they criticize Deleuze and Guattari, from whom they borrow much of their vocabulary, for overemphasizing social forms that unfold as continuous flows and chaotic movement: “Deleuze and Guattari discover the productivity of social reproduction but manage to articulate it only superficially and ephemerally, as a chaotic, indeterminate horizon, marked by the ungraspable event” (E 28). The difference between Hardt and Negri’s position and Deleuze and Guattari’s may be regarded as stylistic in nature. Brennan describes the rhetorical style of Empire as “scholastic,” an approach that seems at odds with the method of Deleuze and Guattari, whose mode of argument both is dedicated to and enacts the deterritorialized flows of desire. Brennan also feels that Hardt and Negri’s interpretation of the concept of agencement or “assemblage” results not, as in Deleuze and Guattari, in a means to an exhilarating, new way of thinking but rather in a rationale for incoherence, for creating a philosophical universe in which incompatible thinkers such as Machiavelli, Spinoza, and Marx can eclectically coexist.

Against Brennan, it may be replied that Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, and Hardt and Negri are all grappling in common with a
larger question than one of style, which Deleuze poses in his study of Foucault: “What powers must we confront, what is our capacity for resistance, today when we can no longer be content to say that the old struggles are no longer worth anything?” In substance, then, Hardt and Negri may be seen to side with their French counterparts in not giving credence to reactive, conventionally institutionalized forms of resistance but only in “going still further in the process of deterritorialization.” The common goal is to locate the potential for revolution, even if this revolution can be described only as a line of flight, migration, or exodus. However, by redefining this potential in terms of “the event,” Hardt and Negri also distance themselves from the beatific faith in a process “already complete as it proceeds and as long as it proceeds” articulated by Deleuze and Guattari at the end of Anti-Oedipus, even while cautioning that the event will emerge from contingency, not necessity. Hardt and Negri are ready to embrace their own “kairos,” as they put it: “Only in the present situation . . . does this coexistence of crisis and the field of immanence become completely clear” (E 374). Not only pessimism, but even ambivalence, which is arguably one of the most resonant of Freudian notions, must be renounced in this context. To complete their phenomenology of political faith, Hardt and Negri accordingly deploy a charged vocabulary of passions and affects.

Negri replaces a terminology of desire in his theory with one of love. Although the term “desire” surfaces throughout Empire, Hardt and Negri ultimately give “love” the last political word in the text. This emphasis should not come as a total surprise if we consider the ideological freight of the concepts. Notwithstanding Deleuze and Guattari’s attempt, beginning in Anti-Oedipus, to redefine “desire” as a process of continuous libidinal production rather than as a psychological condition of lack, the word ultimately carries a dialectical, Hegelian connotation and thus is bound up with the drama of negativity. Foucault also shows a definite awareness in his writing of the need for another word for “desire,” which he satisfies by settling on “pleasures.” In an essay entitled “Spinoza and the Postmodern,” Negri explains why he needs love in his vocabulary: “And even if the philosophers do not like the word ‘love,’ even if the postmoderns marry it to the withering of desire, we who have re-read the Ethics, we the party of Spinozists, dare to speak without false modesty of love as the strongest passion, the passion that creates common existence and destroys the world of power.” Negri’s highlighting of “the passion that creates common existence” signals that, in his estimation, love is linked to poverty and
thus represents a key step in anthropologizing lack. His invocation of the word “love” helps redefine poverty in terms of a lack that is not psychological, but rather biopolitical. Desire is susceptible, on the one hand, to dialectical domestication and, on the other, to assimilation into the meaningless automatism of the drive. It therefore cannot be the libidinal precondition for the realization of immanent miracles. The ability to break the patterns of experience is the result neither of will nor of desire, but only of love.

**Worldly Immanence**

Hardt and Negri thus elaborate a concern central to Deleuze’s thinking, one that the French philosopher articulated in a range of works from *What is Philosophy?* to *Cinema 1: Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image.* Their defiance of political skepticism consorts with Deleuze’s philosophical program to make the world “thinkable” again, to provide the image of thought.

One of the most important moments in Deleuze’s philosophy is his analysis of Italian cinema, in which he praises neorealism for having restored belief in the world even in the face of injustice, poverty, and the intolerable quotidian. On his account, the greatest achievement of film as an art form is not, *pace* André Bazin, the accurate phenomenological representation of things as they are—realism, in other words—but the rescue of human beings’ faith in this world, in what they see and hear, ultimately in their love of life (*C2* 221). As Deleuze puts it: “The link between man and the world is broken. Henceforth the link must become an object of belief: it is the impossible which can only be restored within a faith. The cinema must film not the world, but the belief in this world, our only link” (*C2* 171–72). On this account, the modern cinema of what he calls “the time-image” has an anti-cynical purpose.

Hardt and Negri have been attacked for their messianic view of socialism (*CLI* 28). Yet precisely because they do not preclude the possibility of miraculous events, their immanentism holds open ethical horizons that otherwise would remain inaccessible. For this reason, *Empire* ought to be discussed in the context of neorealism. To judge *Empire* strictly in terms of so-called political realism would be a mistake in the same way that it would be pointless to interpret neorealist film on the sole basis of whether it offers a verifiable historical record. It is telling in this regard that Negri, in an interview with Danilo Zolo, playfully re-imagines *Empire* not as a book but as a film. We might
add that if Empire were a film, it surely would be Miracle in Milan. Certainly, Hardt and Negri’s political theory and Italian neorealist cinema share significant critical affinities that make their encounter seem inevitable. A pronounced emphasis on a philosophy and ontology of immanence is common to both projects. According to Bazin, by refusing the selective principle of editing, neorealism succeeded in portraying an action without removing it from its material context (WC2 38). Consequently, neorealism’s turn away from the formal and technical intrusions of montage corresponds to the idea that signification arises from the miracle of fortuitous encounters. The film theorist and co-author with De Sica of the screenplay for Miracle in Milan, Cesare Zavattini, indeed defined neorealism as a “cinema of the encounter,” proposing a formulation that Deleuze echoes in Cinema 2.

Enlarging and refining Bazin’s position, Deleuze contends that neorealism established an entirely new mode of cinematic visualization: the time-image. He describes this phenomenon in terms of an “action that floats in the situation, rather than bringing it to a conclusion or strengthening it” (C2 4). The possibility of action, and more specifically of revolution, also might be said to “float” in Hardt and Negri’s philosophy, which, on account of its radical immanentism, appears incompatible with any teleology. If neorealism for Deleuze does not so much depict reality as aim at it (C2 1), critical theory for Hardt and Negri performs much the same gesture with respect to political action and revolution.

Another basis on which neorealism coincides with Hardt and Negri’s thinking is the emergence, under the aegis of neorealism, of a new subject of cinematic attention: neither the masses as in Eisenstein’s or Griffith’s epic cinema nor the individual focus of a character study but rather the diverse plurality of the multitude. In this connection, it is important to recall that Deleuze’s investigation of cinema emphasizes the fact that, proceeding from neorealism to its so-called “third world manifestations,” modern cinema no longer can make reference to a united people aiming at a collective “evolution or revolution” (C2 219). He suggests that what fills the void left by “the people [who] are missing” are the people that exist only in the condition of a minority (C2 220). What the French philosopher describes, in other words, is what Hardt and Negri would call a multitude. The multitude, unlike the concept of “a people,” is not the objective correlative of the state, but rather it is a sort of expansion of Gramsci’s notion of the subaltern in its refusal of a strong class analytic.
When we consider films such as Rossellini’s *Open City* or *Paisà*, Visconti’s *The Earth Trembles*, De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* or *Miracle in Milan*, we recognize that these directors articulate the experiences of collectivity and singularity in ways that conform neither to the liberal ideal of individualism nor to canonical Marxist ideas of class. We might say that what is at stake in neorealist cinema is, instead, what Negri defines as “the ontological recognition of the common” [*il riconoscimento ontologico del commune*] (CLI 31). The unedited, long take that Bazin identified as the visual signature of neorealism allows the image to retain its singularity. This method avoids the loss of autonomous meaning brought about by the rapid cutting and juxtaposition of shots, which Pudovkin and Kuleshov’s classic example illustrates. At the same time, the acknowledgement of the image’s singularity takes place while registering the multiplicity of the communal. The long take, which Bazin often discussed in conjunction with deep-focus techniques, ideally allows for the simultaneous viewing of subjects both in the background as well as in the foreground.

Although neorealism is hardly an ethically and aesthetically uniform phenomenon in the Italian context, one might say that what characterizes the best neorealist films is their ability to bring to light the complex makeup of the multitude. From the vision of the Resistenza as a collective order encompassing the priest, the communist, and Sora Pina in *Open City* to the various encounters between Italians and Americans in *Paisà* and the plural condition of the thieves emphasized in the original Italian title of *Ladri di biciclette*, neorealism cannot be said to elucidate the plight of either the masses or the people, if by “people” we mean the modern state’s artificial social unity, as Negri does. Neorealism instead confronts us with a multitude of singularities.

The epochal undertaking of the authors of *Empire* is to cast the afterlife of Marxism in a new light, to give it a new terminology. Negri asserts in a recent essay, “The genealogy of the multitude is in the shift from the modern to the postmodern (or, if you like, from Fordism to Postfordism). This genealogy is constituted by the struggles of the working class that have dissolved the ‘modern’ forms of social discipline” (MS9). As presented in *Empire*, Hardt and Negri’s new concept of the “multitude” plays a crucial role in the logic of their argument. In *Empire*, the concept of the multitude clearly revises and displaces the traditional notions of the *plebs*, the working class, or the masses. Through this rethinking of collectivity, Hardt and Negri aim to bring to consciousness the subject’s condition of biopolitical exposure in postmodern society. In their eyes, labels such as “the
masses” and “the proletariat” too often have been used to describe an irrational, mob-like group, a force that is volatile, dangerous, and easily manipulated. By contrast, the multitude represents for them a horizon of active, organized, and self-empowered social agency. The disparity of power traditionally perceived to exist between the masses and transcendent authority may be replaced, the authors repeatedly assert, by an immanent space of liberation, a dimension in which the multitude thrives by virtue of its own intrinsic biopower. In Empire, they list several historical manifestations of the biopower of the multitude, for example their catalogue of “the most radical and powerful struggles of the final years of the twentieth century,” among which they include Tiananmen Square, the Intifada against Israel, the 1992 riots in Los Angeles, the Chiapas uprising beginning in 1994, the labor strikes in France at the end of 1995, as well as the 1996 strikes in South Korea (E 54). Along related lines, they find instances of “self-valorization, cooperation, and political self-organization” in the various phases of “capitalist worker militancy” informing the transition from Fordism and Taylorism to “the post-Fordist informational regimes of production” (E 409). In the section of Multitude entitled “The Wealth of the Poor,” Hardt and Negri furthermore argue that the poor and migrant workers ought not to be regarded as constituents of the Lumpenproletariat but rather as the exemplary subjects of biopolitical production. 53

Such a claim highlights the sympathy between Hardt and Negri’s position and that of De Sica’s Miracle in Milan. The community of vagrants depicted in the film aptly embodies the principal traits of the multitude. The community comprises a multiplicity of singularities, is anthropologically complex (as the director makes clear by emphasizing not only the group’s rootlessness, but also its inclusion of black immigrants), and cannot be identified in a traditional sense with the working class, thus refusing an expected role in a manner that disturbed many critics at the time. 54 Small wonder that Hardt and Negri nominate Miracle in Milan as an emblem of their mission in Empire. Other imaginative works discussed in Empire, such as Melville’s Bartleby, the Scrivener or Coetzee’s Life and Times of Michael K., straightforwardly dramatize the protagonists’ refusal of their societies’ demands. Miracle in Milan, however, may be seen to reflect back on and illuminate the entire strategic and ontological argument of Empire.

Hardt and Negri discuss the film in a key passage of Empire entitled “The Poor,” a segment whose importance the authors underscore by italicizing the text. Here they paradoxically assert that the poor embody power—that, as they put it, “There is world poverty, but there is above
all world possibility and only the poor is capable of this” (E 157). As they point out, the mainstream of Marxism always has looked with contempt on the poor, whom it considers undisciplined in relation to the working class. In this connection, Miracle in Milan provides the authors with a powerful expression of a viewpoint that is ethically opposed to such contempt. They admire the film’s celebration of the creativity of Milan’s poor and needy, who are envisioned as capable of an ecstatic flight into freedom: “Consider how, when in the early 1950s Vittorio De Sica and Cesare Zavattini set the poor to fly away on broomsticks at the end of their beautiful film Miracle in Milan, they were so violently denounced for utopianism by the spokesmen of socialist realism” (E 158). Hardt and Negri compare the spokesmen of socialist realism in the 1950s to contemporary philosophers intent on the cynical disparagement of social struggle, pedants who are unable to realize that, in the authors’ words, “The discovery of postmodernity consisted in the reproposition of the poor at the center of the political and productive terrain” (E 158).

This unique conception of the political potential of the poor is one of the book’s central claims. So we ought to consider how the notion of the multitude in Hardt and Negri’s writings may be understood to “repropose” the poor, before examining the contradictions of the “immanent utopia” affirmed both by Miracle in Milan and by the authors’ praise of the film. In the case of Empire, Hardt and Negri’s insistence on the vitality of the multitude clearly aims to dispel the academic air of much political philosophy. For a reader such as Jacques Rancière, Negri’s romanticizing of the homeless or nomadic condition of the poor is a problematic trait, as when the Italian philosopher writes that “the prometheism of the poor, of the migrant, is the salt of the earth; and the world has really been changed by hybridization and mixing” [semmai il prometeismo dei poveri, dei migranti, è il sale della Terra e il mondo è realmente mutato dal nomadismo e dal meticciato] (CLI 32).55 The implication of such remarks is that, for Negri, the multitude constitutes the ground on which politics may be defined as ontology and ontology as politics. In place of analytic definitions, Empire offers an enthusiastic outpouring of encomiums to the political potential of the multitude, to its propensity in Hardt and Negri’s words “to love, transform, and create,” and to its drive toward emancipation.56 Described in these mythical terms, however, the idea of a subject that is selflessly pure in its actions and coincides with limitless power may look like a moral fable or fantasy.57 If Empire is a parable like Miracle in Milan, how does the film shed light on the political treatise?
Cinema has long been valued as a form of political expression. More than any other art, the achievements of cinema are a function of its relation to the masses, of its ability to expose the political vitality of the masses, as in different ways the films of Griffith and Eisenstein demonstrate. The classic masterpieces of film always have established a dialogue between the people and a revolutionary future, and not only in their Russian manifestations. For Deleuze, even Hollywood movies aspired, at least at one time, to a revolutionary transformation insofar as they aimed to visualize the birth of a nation made up of immigrants. Cinema in general, on this account, raises the possibility of our projection into the world.

Modern cinema in particular, however, ceases for Deleuze to envision the “conquest of power by a proletariat, or by a united or unified people” and instead permits the unveiling of a multiplicity of peoples that are often marginalized and fragmented (C2 219–20). In other words, in modern cinema—as, according to Hardt and Negri, in modern society—we witness the transition from the people as the subject of power to what Deleuze calls “un peuple mineur,” a category that seems to be analogous to Hardt and Negri’s multitude. Deleuze’s stress on the “minor” condition of the people depicted by modern cinema does not mean that in his eyes the catholic and revolutionary dimensions of the medium, which are inherent in its very ontology, in its capacity to establish links between man and the world, are compromised. To the contrary, the cinema of the time-image, which is exemplified above all by neorealism, introduces the possibility of bearing witness to injustice and inequality while at the same time promoting a sort of immanent faith in this world.

Our challenge is to decide to what extent the miraculous aspect of Miracle in Milan calls into question the immanent vocation of neorealism and, in this sense, both elucidates and brings to an end its realistic and political functions. As we have observed, neorealism marks not only the triumph of pure optical and sound situations in film, as Deleuze suggests, but also the emergence in contemporary culture of an ensemble of singularities, a multitude. In the vast majority of neorealist films, from Open City to The Earth Trembles and Miracle in Milan, neither the individual nor the mass is ultimately what counts (Bazin observes that the mass is rarely presented by neorealist directors as a positive force, WC2 22 ff.). The object of neorealism is a more holistic view that, following Bazin, might be defined as “immanentism”: “The originality of Italian neorealism, as compared with the school of realism that preceded it and with the Soviet Cinema, lies in never
making reality the servant of an *a priori* principle. . . . Neorealism knows only immanence” (WC2 64). Hardt and Negri make a similar claim on behalf of their theoretical reinterpretation of Marxism, which they distinguish from other interpretations precisely on account of their focus on the immanent. As a result, Hardt and Negri, like the neorealist directors before them, consistently lay themselves open to criticism for their lack of a programmatic, methodological approach to politics and their advocacy of a naïve biopolitical vitalism.

**Lines of Flight in Milan and *Empire***

To those who say that escaping is not courageous, we answer: what is not escape

*and social investment at the same time?*

—Deleuze and Guattari

A closer look at *Miracle in Milan* with this background in mind will help to clarify what Hardt and Negri’s project shares with neorealism and, in particular, to illuminate the political limitations of both endeavors. *Miracle in Milan* was released in 1951 at a time of extraordinarily active internal migration in Italy, during which thousands of people wound up living in slums in the environs of Rome and Milan. This time of internal migration coincided with the period of growth known as the “economic miracle.” After achieving international success with the films *Shoeshine* and *Bicycle Thieves*, De Sica decided to adapt Zavattini’s 1943 novella *Toto the Good* [*Totò il buono*] for the screen.

The fantastic plot of the film begins with a poor, virtuous woman’s discovery of an infant named Toto under a cabbage plant. The woman, Lolotta, raises him until her death, at which point the child is placed in an orphanage. When he is released at the age of eighteen, Toto becomes the inspirational leader of a makeshift village of the poor on the periphery of Milan. When oil is discovered on the shantytown’s premises, Mobbi, the richest man in the city, enlists the police to evict the inhabitants. Toto starts an uprising against Mobbi with the help of a dove sent by Lolotta that confers on him the power of magically realizing his every wish. Toto uses this power to remedy the poverty of his cohorts, inadvertently setting in motion a vicious circle of envy and greed for the blessings he bestows. After temporarily losing his magical power, Toto regains it while standing in front of the *Duomo* of Milan, just in time to escape the police who are arresting the slum’s squatters. Stealing the implements of the city’s street sweepers and
turning them into flying broomsticks, Toto leads his comrades into the sky.

In what light the filmmakers meant us to take the supernatural events of the plot is not entirely clear; *Miracle in Milan* might well be said to represent the paradoxical accomplishment of a realistic fairy tale. The horizon of political action in the film occurs in unproblematic contiguity with that of the miraculous, signified by the apparition of the dove, which functions as a stand-in for the spirit of Lolotta but also as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Tellingly, when Toto uses the power given him by the miraculous dove to shape life in the community, he winds up disrupting the normal social economy. The narrative begins like a children’s fable with the formula “once upon a time,” yet the visual character and location of the shantytown in the Milanese neighborhood of Lambrate are convincingly realistic, thanks to the arduous efforts of De Sica and Zavattini to scout locations. In *Miracle in Milan*, as P. Adams Sitney has noted, neorealism unexpectedly rediscovers the influence of Georges Meliès, the delights of fantasy and cinematic illusionism. Hardt and Negri rightly recollect, however, that when the film was first distributed, the critics disparaged it as an “involution” of neorealism, as its blend of fairy tale and neorealist elements struck many viewers as a contradiction in terms.

Although the film won the Cannes Film Festival in 1951 and the New York Film Critics Award and was warmly and publicly praised by the likes of Pudovkin, Cocteau, and Welles, it met with a cool reception in Italy from the moment of its release. To begin with, the film’s original title, “The Poor Who Disturb” [*I poveri disturbano*], had to be abandoned because it was too controversial (*MMVDS* 116, 122, 125). In spite of the renaming of the film, the filmmakers aimed not to produce an allegory of evasion, as Zavattini explained, but a parable of indignation that took its cue from radical, rather than bourgeois, Christianity (*MMVDS* 131–42). Zavattini claimed never to have any particular political sympathy for Marxism, declaring that, over the consolations of ideology, he preferred to surprise reality and to be surprised by it. Accordingly, he developed a taste for the fabulous and the determination to articulate his concern for social inequality and injustice through a visionary and mythical re-imagination of reality. Against the background of the artistic witch hunt following the first phase of neorealism, when films such as Rossellini’s “trilogy of solitude” (consisting of *Stromboli*, *Land of God*, *Europa‘51*, and *Voyage to Italy*), Visconti’s *Senso*, and De Sica’s works were excoriated by most Italian critics, Zavattini’s Franciscan pietas looked insufficient to
defend *Miracle in Milan* against its detractors. In general, the criticism of the film bears more than a passing resemblance to the derision that greeted the publication of *Empire.*

Much of the critics’ puzzlement may have surrounded the film’s curious ending, which depicts Milan’s poor and homeless “flying high” in the transcendent space of the sky. The immanent utopia realized early on in the film’s neorealist passages in other words dissolves in the transcendence of the film’s final scene, which the authors of *Empire* single out for praise. In *Miracle in Milan,* as in *Empire,* the revolution has already happened, which is another way of saying that the film’s conclusion dramatically confronts us with the question: what comes after the revolution? Precisely through its work of dissolution or transmutation, *Miracle in Milan* achieves its unique place in the economy of contemporary culture, enlarging the very questions that led to its conceptualization by challenging their basic premises. The film is simultaneously a Christian parable and a socialist-humanist indictment of capitalist society that in the end explodes the claims of naïve realism while simultaneously avoiding conventional religious wisdom. Perhaps we might add that *Miracle in Milan* aspires to overcome neorealism proper in something like the same way, and for many of the same reasons, that *Empire* aims to overcome Marxism.

As we noted earlier, the film’s detractors reserved their harshest attacks for the film’s final sequence. Both Guido Aristarco and Ennio Flaiano remarked that the poor characters portrayed in the film are not truly poor because they lack class consciousness (*MMVDS* 157). More than a few reviewers have brought the same accusation against Negri’s description of the multitude. For Aristarco in particular, the most troubling feature of the film was its depiction of the squatters as disenfranchised individuals who neither work nor intend to work. Whereas *Bicycle Thieves* was, in his opinion, an authentic dramatization of unemployment, poverty, and class solidarity, *Miracle in Milan* reveals its true colors at its end, when Toto and the squatters steal the brooms from the street cleaners. On this view, the ultimate ethical conflict in the film occurs between the poor who work and the poor who do not work. It should come as no surprise, then, that Aristarco was bewildered by the film’s miraculous finale in which the squatters hover between dream and reality, flying over the sky of Milan (*MMVDS* 174–78).

To such viewers, the flight of the poor to a mystical domain where, according to the screenplay, “good morning really means good morning” could only look like the regressiveness of false hope: “Soon, a
long line of tramps on broomsticks is flying through the sky. They begin to sing their simple song of hope in the future, as they fly above the square, the cathedral and the town. Toto and Edvige lead them as they happily disappear among the clouds: toward a kingdom where good morning really means good morning” (MMVS 120). As we already have seen, however, the idea that work ought to be valued only insofar as it represents a mode of creative sharing is crucial to the film’s evocation of a miraculous form of life. (In this connection, we might recall with amusement the scene of Toto’s fantastical naming of streets through mathematical formulae.) Indeed, the squatters’ very refusal to define their identity as workers, their lack of anxiety in this respect, establishes them within what Agamben might call the glory of a quasi-sabbatical time. In *Il Regno e la Gloria*, Agamben sets out to re-establish a dialogue between politics and theology by explicating the phenomenology of glory. In his opinion, the glory that ensues from the Last Judgment will consist of a cessation of all activities, of a state that ought to be characterized neither as one of *otium*, nor of laziness, but rather of decorous “*inoperosita.*” From its very first scene, then, *Miracle in Milan* visualizes a form of life that is “miraculous” in the sense that it resists conventional expectations. One sign of this resistance is the film’s preservation of the fairy-tale relationship between Toto and Lolotta, blessedly sparing the child from any form of “addiction,” as Santner puts it, to the adult’s enigmatic desires. Santner so defines the miracle in the light of Jean Laplanche’s celebrated theory according to which our libidinal life is the result of the Other’s enigmatic desires: “A miracle would represent the event of a genuine break in such a fateful enchantment of unconscious transmission.”

Such a conclusion, however, cannot dispel the impression that *Miracle in Milan* attempts to distract its viewers from the demise of the immanent utopia of the Milanese shantytown by focusing on the happy ending of transcendence. The destiny of the poor in De Sica’s film, like the fate of the multitude in Hardt and Negri’s treatise, appears to have little to do with the traditional dignity of work or, more specifically, of organized labor. As in *Empire*, exodus represents the ultimate solution to the anthropological and political problems of capitalist society. Zavattini’s sensitivity to the risk of mystifying the agonistic conditions of history clearly prompted him to deny that the film’s final sequence shows Toto and his fellow squatters ascending to paradise. The author suggested instead that they are simply migrating to another state: “I have said it and written it, the squatters do not go to paradise but migrate, like immigrants going to Caracas; the
reading of the ending would have been easier had we been able to adapt a sequence that De Sica was not able to realize; the squatters would try to land with their broomsticks, but on every field was written ‘private property,’ and then they really would have had to leave” (MMVDS 25).70 In light of Zavattini’s comment, it is interesting to note as well that the screenplay originally contained a scene showing some of the squatters being shot out of the sky, a prospect finally deemed too upsetting for audiences (MMVDS 111).71

However, in the preface to the English edition of the screenplay, De Sica ascribes to Miracle in Milan a more benign intent: “This is a fable, slightly wistful perhaps, but quietly optimistic within its poetic framework. If I might be allowed to give it such a name” (MM 13). In the same preface, he names Saint Francis as the model for his representations of the poor: “They greet water with the same pure joy as Saint Francis did. . . . They are poor, then, but they are not outcast” (MM 11). The oscillation between Zavattini’s pessimism and De Sica’s optimism comprises one of the chief features of interest of Miracle in Milan. Along similar lines, Hardt and Negri’s insistence on the positive attributes of poverty and migrancy in order to keep at bay their real costs in terms of suffering and alienation has drawn persistent criticism. In the interview with Danilo Zolo cited earlier, Negri decries pessimism once more and admonishes readers to look at poverty in terms not only of misery but also of possibility, associating migrant workers as a group with the dignity of a search for “truth, production, happiness” (CLI 31–32).72

It is hardly surprising that Hardt and Negri assign Miracle in Milan such a privileged role in the economy of their polemic, notwithstanding the film’s ambiguous finale. Perhaps the authors might even recognize, in the film’s final tableau of the poor flying together through the skies over Milan, an instance of what they define in Multitude as “swarm intelligence,” a distributed network attack patterned after a flock of birds (M 91). Tellingly, the multitude is defined elsewhere in the same book as an emblem of the desire for another world (M 227).

Ultimately, however, Miracle in Milan may be said to allegorically depict, in the final flight of the poor, the paradoxical capacity of neorealist film to convert pessimism into an act of immanent faith, as a miracle can only emerge from a contingent and immanent perspective. Perhaps this is the reason why many critics regard Miracle in Milan as the last neorealist film, as a kind of apotheosis of the form that makes explicit neorealism’s claims not to realism but to faith and belief in the world. Bazin was so delighted by the ideological ambiguity
of De Sica’s film that he was moved to avow that a true parable should have something for everybody: “I would not dream of saying that the kindness of De Sica is of greater value than the third theological virtue or class consciousness, but I see in the modesty of his position a definite artistic advantage” (C2 70). Yet Bazin’s words of approval merely beg the question: is such modesty also a political virtue?

Hardt and Negri’s concluding evocation of Saint Francis at the end of Empire could be seen as an act of political modesty, albeit one inflected with a Catholic specificity that is somewhat problematic insofar as it disrupts the book’s otherwise ecumenical spirit:

There is an ancient legend that might serve to illuminate the future life of communist militancy: that of Saint Francis of Assisi. Consider his work. To denounce the poverty of the multitude, he adopted that common condition and discovered there the ontological power of a new society. . . . Once again in postmodernity we find ourselves in Francis’s situation, posing against the misery of power the joy of being. This is a revolution that no power will control—because biopower and communism, cooperation and revolution remain together, in love, simplicity, and also innocence. This is the irrepressible lightness and joy of being communist. (E 413)

The authors’ exaltation of such “innocence” and “simplicity” only prompts a final constellation of questions: is Empire, like Miracle in Milan, simply a myth about faith in the world? Can Empire afford to be nothing more than such a myth? The final sentence of Empire is disappointing in its failure to anticipate and address such questions. Hardt and Negri’s use of the word “lightness” strikes a false note, not only on account of its cliché, post-Kunderan associations, but also because it implies a denial of the political cost of communist allegiance, encodes a blindness to what Negri himself describes as the “harshness of immanence.”73

If Empire in the end seems too cheerfully optimistic, if it shuts its eyes to the difficulty of restoring faith in our participation in the world (which can hardly be said to involve “lightness”), the book nonetheless succeeds in arguing that the contemporary struggle cannot revolve around a process of pristine secularization, around a strict pragmatics of power and its existing institutions, as a more jaded voice such as Schmitt’s would have us believe. In this sense, a political miracle can never be for Hardt and Negri, as it is for Schmitt in The Concept of the Political, the equivalent of the sovereign’s decision. Quite the contrary, we finally can only believe and have faith in a “real event” for which we have no model. This faith is not theological, is immanent
and ontological, and yet dispels the myth that modernity’s destiny is skepticism and cynicism. By insisting on the event that has no model, the authors push the logic of immanence at work in *Empire* to its limit, inviting the criticism that their idea of the event seems to be merely a way of smuggling the language of transcendence back into their argument.

In this regard, it ultimately may be more productive to read *Empire* against the grain of its rhetorical insistence on the singularity of the event, restoring to the authors’ immanentism something of the fluidity of Deleuze and Guattari’s process of deterritorialization, while retaining Hardt and Negri’s own refusal to concede that this process is “already complete.” For in spite of their avowal that the real event has no model, the authors of *Empire* repeatedly invoke what at least must be counted as historically delimited instances of real events, whether “the events [of the late 1980s and 1990s] in Beijing, Nablus, Los Angeles, Chiapas, Paris or Seoul” (*E*54) or the struggles undertaken by “the communist and liberatory combatants of the twentieth-century revolutions, the intellectuals who were persecuted and exiled in the course of anti-fascist struggles, the republicans of the Spanish civil war and the European resistance movements, and the freedom fighters of all the anticolonial and anti-imperialist wars” (*E*412). In the end, Hardt and Negri’s argument in *Empire* points not to a unique model of the real event but rather to a contingent plurality of real events that already have contributed to changing our political imagination.

Instead of envisioning the real event as a semi-teleological point of convergence, we thus ought to think of an *agencement* or assemblage of events that takes place on different plateaus according to lines of flight. Accordingly, the peculiar effectiveness of both *Empire* and *Miracle in Milan* may be discerned as not residing in the endorsement of a definitive cultural or biopolitical model but rather in having become events in their own right. Whereas models encourage conceptual and methodological automatism, events are such in virtue of their ability to disrupt the order of things. Both Hardt and Negri’s philosophical treatise and De Sica and Zavattini’s film are events not only because they have opened up a space to think and act differently but also because they have mounted formidable opposition to the entrenched culture of cynicism. Their respective achievements consist in the persuasive voicings they give to a stubborn faith in the potential of the multitude, of the poor who disturb.

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NOTES

1 For their insightful contributions to the discussion of several of the texts and films in this paper, I wish to thank all of my students from the course “The Afterlife of Marxism,” which we pursued together at Northwestern University’s Humanities Center in spring 2006, and in particular Jeremy Cohan, Ben Fink, Jason Malikov, Noora Lori, and Ben Shepard. I also wish to thank Scott Gottsbreuht, the Editorial Assistant of MLN, for his extremely helpful editorial work on this essay.


3 “[All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology.” Carl Schmitt, Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005) 36.


6 An important consequence of allowing for the possibility of a post-secular moment is the freedom to question the supposedly “universal” tenets of secular rationality.

7 William Connolly has argued convincingly that, if not banished from critical discussion, secularism should be reconsidered carefully in order to avoid the reduction of public discourse to pure, rational argument à la Habermas, a narrowing that hinders not only subjective and intersubjective creativity but also the possibility to “appreciate positive possibilities in the visceral register of thinking and discourse.” William Connolly, Why I Am Not a Secularist (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 1999) 35–36.

8 Santner, “Miracles Happen,” 89–90.

9 Badiou sums up this notion of automatism when, in his reading of Saint Paul’s life and work, he declares that “sin is the life of desire as autonomy, automatism” (Saint Paul, 79).

10 With regard to the idea of “forms of life,” we should note that Hardt and Negri do not offer a theory that is a grammar or reservoir of rules ready to be actualized. In a move that is Wittgensteinian in inspiration, they instead imagine a language that may be deduced from “resistant” forms of life: the social upheavals of 1968, the workerist movement, the anti-globalization protests at Seattle and Genova, the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, and more generally the interrelation between a politics of the common and electronic methods of communication. For their specific articulation of Wittgenstein’s importance to the philosophical currents that resulted in “a new materialism which negated every transcendent element and constituted a radical reorientation of spirit,” see Hardt and Negri’s injunction “to focus on . . . the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein,” see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000) 374–80; hereafter cited parenthetically as E.

11 Schmitt, Political Theology, 39.


This emphasis on the immanent revises the classic Marxist insistence on changing the world rather than interpreting it. In Empire, interpretation and action coexist and are reciprocally implicated.


Even in a recent interview, Negri stresses the origin of his thinking in the refusal of, and resistance to, labor, as he considers the capitalist organization of labor a real form of slavery. See Goodbye Mr. Socialism, ed. Raf Valvola Scelsi (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2006).

"Because the sphere of the political is in the final analysis determined by the real possibility of enmity, political conceptions and ideas cannot very well start with an anthropological optimism." Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political, ed. Charles Schwab (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1976) 64.

See note 10 above.


In a recent interview, Negri reaffirms his hope for the future of communism, as opposed to socialism, in terms of “the optimism of reason” [l’ottimismo della ragione]: “ Whereas socialism is dialectic and by now a bad memory, communism is the optimism of reason. . . .” Antonio Negri, Goodbye Mr. Socialism, ed. Raf Valvola Scelsi (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2006) 23, trans. modified.

25 Brennan is a prominent example of this sort of reader.

26 Michel Foucault, La volonté de savoir: droit de mort et pourvoir sur la vie, ed. Frédéric Rambeau (Paris: Gallimard, 2006) 208. We might regard Empire, indeed, as the elaboration on a global scale of Foucault’s theory of power as articulated in the first volume of his History of Sexuality.


31 “Indeed I am fully convinced that experience has revealed every conceivable form of commonwealth where many men can live in harmony,” Baruch (Benedictus de) Spinoza, Political Treatise in Complete Works, trans. Samuel Shirley, ed. Michael Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002) 681.


33 On the dangers of reading Empire as a theodicy, see Bill Maurer, “On Divine Markets and the Problem of Justice: Empire as Theodicy” in Passevent and Dean, Empire’s New Clothes, 57–72. Agamben points out that Voltaire, despite being the inferior philosopher, managed in Candide to render a successful caricature of Leibniz, because Leibniz set out in his Essais de théodicée to justify rather than to save the world and pursued his argument with absolute faith in the necessity of the law. Agamben, Il Regno e la Gloria (Milano: Neri Pozza, 2007) 298.


35 The collective Retort (which includes Iain Boal, T. J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, and Michael Watts) mounts what ought to be regarded as the most effective, least triumphalist critique of Empire. The group strikes the right note, among other reasons, because, unlike most of Hardt and Negri’s detractors, Retort proposes alternative strategies of resistance to capital and empire and does not shy away from positions that they happen to share with Empire’s authors. For example, the group’s members freely make use of the term “multitude” to discuss the possibility of political assembly. Yet they also rightly point out that cybertechnology, the medium of the multitude, is also the medium of what they define as “the machinery of a self-administered dreamworld.” Retort, Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War (New York: Verso, 2005) 4.


38 Ibid., 196.

39 Deleuze, Foucault, 115.
More than any intrinsic condition of “immaterial labor,” it is the need to affirm Spinoza’s line of reasoning in *Empire* that explains why Hardt and Negri adopt a terminology of feeling rather than of structure to describe the workings of contemporary political economy.


Complicating this credo, Deleuze claims in *Pourparlers* that neorealism’s achievement consists in marking the end of any belief in the possibility of acting or reacting to situations, while somehow avoiding passivity with regard to the intolerability of everyday life. Gilles Deleuze, *Pourparlers* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1990) 74. A similar, complex alchemy of faith, passivity, activity, and hope informs Hardt and Negri’s thought.


Negri recently has written: “If the historical shift is defined as epochal (ontologically so), then the criteria or *dispositifs* of measure valid for an epoch will be radically thrown into question. We are living through this shift, and it is not certain whether new criteria and *dispositifs* of measure are being proposed.” See “Pour une définition ontologique de la multitude” in *Multitudes*, no. 9 (Mai–Juin 2002): 36–48, as published on the Web site http://multitudes.samizdat.net/article29.html; hereafter cited parenthetically as MS9.

Beginning in the 1950s, the movement of *operaismo* [workerism] in Italy expounded the idea of the “autonomy” of the working class. Mario Tronti’s text “Operaio e capitale” became the major point of reference for a generation. In the wake of the Italian *operaismo*, Negri became the principal ideological spokesperson of the political group *Autonomia Operaia* in the 1970s, articulating the macroscopic metamorphosis that labor was undergoing. Over time, the idea of the autonomy of the working class had come to be regarded in the mainstream Marxist tradition as an impossibility, since the working class was seen as dependent on its relationship to capital. Like Tronti, Negri thought that it was time to reverse this assumption. Consequently, the notion of *autonomia* ought to be considered the first step toward the multitude.


Ibid., 341.

Ibid., 382.
55 As Rancière puts it: “Les mouvements nomadiques invoqués comme preuves de la puissance explosive des multitudes sont pour l’essentiel des mouvements de populations chassées par la violence des États-nations ou par la misère absolue où les a plongées leur faillite.” See Jacques Rancière, “People ou multitude: question d’Eric Alliez à Jaques Rancière,” MS9 95–100. His point is that the concept of the multitude seems to be the objective correlative of globalization, whereas the notion of a people presumes a contractual relation along the lines of the Hobbesian state. Rancière argues forcefully that the survival and multiplication of nation-states alongside the processes of globalization is a possibility that Negri does not account for very well.

56 From another viewpoint, this enthusiasm may look like an idealization. Rancière observes that the concept of the multitude may be seen to encode a phobia of the negative, as well as the suppressed anxiety that politics is nothing more than politics, an intrinsically agonistic discipline. He identifies a Nietzschean and Deleuzian genealogy for Hardt and Negri’s brand of immanatism, based on the shared rejection of any negative dimension. In this context, Rancière contends, politics becomes impossible; see “People ou multitude,” MS9 95–100. For an acute commentary on both Rancière’s and Hardt and Negri’s positions, see Ernesto Laclau, “Can Immanence Explain Social Struggles” in Passevent and Dean, Empire’s New Clothes, 21–30.

57 Negri provides an unconvincing reply to this line of criticism in his essay. Although Hardt and Negri develop the link between the multitude and immanence in philosophically persuasive terms, and, according to Balibar, the Derridean notion of spectrality offers a figure of the transcendental, the aim in both cases seems to be to provide new moral foundations for a political subject that is immune to realization. How spectral is the multitude? How improbable is the idea of an immanent utopia realized by the multitude through its constituent power?


59 Indeed, neorealism could offer an exemplary case for an understanding of the multitude. According to Negri, one of the multitude’s characteristics seems to be its resistance to concrete phenomenological manifestations. The multitude seems content to exist in a perpetual virtual state. “It is still necessary to insist on the difference between the notion of multitude and that of people,” writes Negri in “Toward an Ontological Definition of the Multitude.” “The multitude can neither be grasped nor explained in contractarian terms (once contractarianism is understood as dependent on transcendental philosophy rather than empirical experience). In the most general sense, the multitude is deficient of representation because it is an incomensurable multiplicity. The people is always represented as a unity, whilst the multitude is not representable, because it is monstrous vis à vis the teleological and transcendental rationalisms of modernity. In contrast with the concept of the people, the concept of multitude is a singular multiplicity, a concrete universal. The people constituted a social body; the multitude does not, because the multitude is the flesh of life. If on the one hand we oppose the multitude to the people, on the other hand we must put it in contrast with the masses and the plebs. Masses and plebs have often been terms used to describe an irrational and passive social force, violent and dangerous precisely by virtue of its being easily manipulated. On the contrary, the multitude is an active social agent, a multiplicity that acts” MS9 36–48.

60 Vittorio De Sica, Miracle in Milan (New York: The Orion Press, 1968), 19. Hereafter cited in the text using the abbreviation MM.

62 Maria Carla Cassarini, ed., Miracolo a Milano di Vittorio De Sica: Storia e preistoria di un film (Genova: Le Mani, 2000) 137; hereafter cited parenthetically as MMVDS.

63 See Zavattini’s interview with Silvana Cirillo, in which the author comments on the sources of his inspiration and his concern for the poor: “Mai che pero questo diventasse teoria o filosofia o avesse aganci col marxismo . . .” (MMVDS 106).

64 Piero Meldini, for example, dismissed Miracle in Milan as a “parody” of neorealism that avoided the real ideological conflict between rich and poor and settled instead for a delusively evangelical and apocalyptic optimism: “Apparently in line with neorealist aesthetics, . . . Miracle in Milan provides instead its parody” (MMVDS 99). Even Bazin, in one of the few positive assessments of Miracle in Milan, observes that none of the villains in the film are antipathetic (WC2 69). For a sample of the skeptical reception that greeted the publication of Empire, see note 33.

65 On the other hand, the film’s achievement in this regard also may be said to have inspired the moderately miraculous event of the birth of Bob and Harvey Weinstein’s independent filmmaking “empire” in the United States, as Harvey Weinstein himself has recently disclosed. In a reminiscence about Miracle in Milan in The New York Times, the producer credits the film’s effort to “allow us to believe that the impossible is possible” with inspiring the brothers Weinstein “to bring the classics of cinema to movie theaters across the country.” Harvey Weinstein, “Spreading Cheer, Doves and Transvestites,” The New York Times, November 4, 2007.


67 Responding with a similar dismay, Edoardo Bruno replied to Zavattini’s claim that the film was not about evasion by declaring that the moral of the film could only be that failure must be expected if the collective is not organized (MMVDS 166).

68 Agamben, Il Regno e la Gloria, 262.


70 As it does on other topics, the film neatly anticipates how Hardt and Negri will address the problems of the multitude in terms of exodus and migration.

71 Like the protagonist in another great parable of the twentieth century, namely Kafka’s The Bucket Rider, the poor in Miracle in Milan fly for the negative reason that they have not found real solidarity. Something ominous, not romantic, ought to be discerned in the image of their flying.

72 Negri’s position on this score may be aligned with Maurice Blanchot’s description of what Deleuze calls “revolutionary escape”: “What is this escape? The word is poorly chosen to please, Courage consists, however, in agreeing to flee rather than live tranquilly and hypocritically in false refuges.” Blanchot, L’amitié (Paris: Gallimard, 1971) 292 as quoted in Deleuze and Guattari, Anti-Oedipus, 341.

73 Negri, Subversive Spinoza, 116.