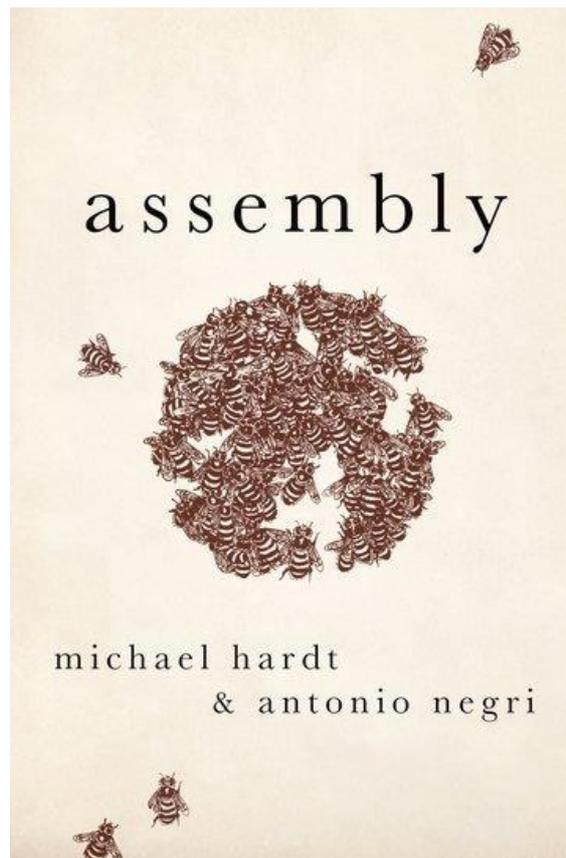


Reflections on Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's Book "Assembly"

Christian Fuchs

University of Westminster, London, UK, christian.fuchs@uti.at, @fuchschristian,
<http://fuchs.uti.at>



Abstract: This contribution presents reflections on Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's book "Assembly" (2017, Oxford: Oxford University Press, ISBN 978-0190677961).

Keywords: assembly, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, multitude, common, entrepreneurship of the multitude, the new Prince, digital capitalism, digital assemblage, neoliberalism, finance

1. Introduction

Hardt and Negri's *Assembly* is a critical, broad, all-encompassing analysis of contemporary society. It is a major work that turns the trilogy of *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004) and *Commonwealth* (2009) into a tetralogy. These four works are organised around a core of concepts (empire, the multitude, the commons, immaterial labour) that has developed over a time of seventeen years in response to capitalism's struggles, contradictions, and crises. The book intervenes into the most recent developments of society and social movements. It asks: "Why have the movements, which

address the needs and desires of so many, not been able to achieve lasting change and create a new, more democratic and just society?”. For providing an answer, Hardt and Negri analyse recent changes of politics and the economy.

Assembly focuses on a diversity of interconnected topics such as changes of capitalism, the social production of the commons, digital assemblages, neoliberalism, financialisation, neoliberalism, right-wing extremism, protest and political change, political strategies and tactics, social movements and political parties, the entrepreneurship of the multitude, the appropriation of fixed capital, prefigurative politics, taking power differently, antagonistic reformism, political realism, or the new Prince. The book offers something interesting for lots of different critical groups and individuals, who care about understanding society and changing it toward the better.

The book’s main body consists of 295 pages and a ten-page preface organised in sixteen chapters and four parts. Parts I and IV (“The Leadership Problem”, “The New Prince”) focus on issues of political strategy and tactics, whereas parts II and III (“Social Production”, “Financial Command and Neoliberal Governance”) analyse capitalism’s transformations. The theoretical approach taken is a critical political economy influenced by Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Machiavelli and Spinoza.

2. Capitalism

Hardt and Negri analyse capitalism as a contradictory open totality that in its development has become ever more social and co-operative, but is subject to the dominant class’ and political elites’ control. A dialectic of crises and struggles drives the development of these contradictions.

The social production of the commons that are exploited by capital is a key feature of the contemporary economy and society. “Today production is increasingly social in a double sense: on one hand, people produce ever more socially, in networks of cooperation and interaction; and, on the other, the result of production is not just commodities but social relations and ultimately society itself” (xv, see also 78).

The common consists for Hardt and Negri of two main forms, the natural and the social commons (166), that are divided into five types: the earth and its ecosystems; the “immaterial” common of ideas, codes, images and cultural products; “material” goods produced by co-operative work; metropolitan and rural spaces that are realms of communication, cultural interaction and co-operation; and social institutions and services that organise housing, welfare, health, and education (166). Contemporary capitalism’s class structure is for Hardt and Negri based on the extraction of the commons, which includes the extraction of natural resources; data mining/data extraction; the extraction of the social from the urban spaces on real estate markets; and finance as extractive industry (166-171).

Hardt and Negri analyse capitalism as having developed in three phases: the phase of primitive accumulation, the phase of manufacture and large-scale industry, and the phase of social production. In chapter 11, they provide a typology of ten features of these three phases. In this analysis, a difference between Hardt/Negri’s and David Harvey’s approach becomes evident: Whereas Harvey characterises capitalism’s imperialistic and exploitative nature based on Rosa Luxemburg as ongoing primitive accumulation, primitive accumulation is for Hardt and Negri a stage of capitalist development. They prefer Marx’s notions of formal and real subsumption for characterising capitalism’s processes of exploitation and commodification. In an interlude, Hardt and Negri explicitly discuss this difference of their approach to the one by David Harvey (178-182).

David Harvey uses the notions of formal/real subsumption and primitive accumulation in a converse manner to Hardt/Negri: Whereas primitive accumulation is in his theory an ongoing process of accumulation by dispossession, formal and real subsumption characterise two stages in the development of capitalism, one dominated by absolute surplus-value production, the other by relative surplus-value production. Harvey (2017, 117) in his most recent book *Marx, Capital and the Madness of Economic Reason* says that Marx describes a “move from a formal (coordinations through market mechanisms) to a real (under the direct supervision of capital) subsumption of labour under capital”. “All the features of primitive accumulation that Marx mentions have remained powerfully present within capitalism’s historical geography up until now” (Harvey 2003, 145).

Whereas there are commonalities of Harvey and Hardt/Negri’s analysis of the commons and urban space (see Harvey, Hardt and Negri 2009), it is evident that there are also differences. There is certainly not one correct or valid interpretation of Marx. The decisive circumstance is that Marx 200 years after his birth remains the key influence for understanding capitalism critically. Both Harvey’s and Hardt/Negri’s works are updates of Marx’s theory under the conditions of 21st century capitalism. As long as capitalism exists, people will continue to read Marx in order to find inspiration for how to organise social struggles and will produce new interpretations of Marx. The deep economic crisis of capitalism that has been accompanied by political crises has after decades of postmodernist and neoliberal repression increased the interest in Marx’s works.

Another interesting question that Hardt and Negri’s *Assembly* poses implicitly is: In what type of capitalism do we live? What dimension of capitalism is dominant? This question has recently also been asked in a debate between Nancy Fraser and Luc Boltanski/Arnaud Esquerre (see Boltanski and Esquerre 2016, 2017; Fraser 2017).

Boltanski and Esquerre suggest the emergence of a new form of cultural capitalism that is based on enrichment from collectibles, luxury goods, brands, arts, heritage, culture, fashion, trends, etc. They speak of the emergence of an integrated capitalism that is based on four forms of valorisation that are based on standardised mass production, the collection form, the trend form and the asset form. Boltanski and Esquerre’s approach shows certain parallels to Hardt and Negri’s in that both stress that the boundaries of the company and society and between leisure and labour have in the production of value become blurred:

“Work is no longer concentrated in factories and identified as a factor of production; instead, the workforce is widely dispersed, divided between public and private domains, between permanent employees and the informal precariat. It is also spread across a much wider range of activities, many of which are not even identified as ‘work’, but rather presented as an expression of ‘desire’ or ‘passion’, even by those who engage in them, often at heavy cost” (Boltanski and Esquerre 2017, 54).

“Today the divisions of the working day are breaking down as work time and life time are increasingly mixed and we are called on to be productive throughout all times of life. With your smartphone in hand, you are never really away from work or off the clock, and for a growing number of people, constant access not only confuses the boundaries between work and leisure but also eats into the night and sleep. At all hours you can check your e-mail or shop for shoes, read news

updates or visit porn sites. The capture of value tends to extend to envelop all the time of life. We produce and consume in a global system that never sleeps” (Hardt and Negri 2017, 185).

Nancy Fraser (2017) argues that Boltanski and Esquerre overestimate cultural capitalism and underestimate finance. In her view, finance capitalism is the dominant form and dimension of capitalism today: “I worry, [...] that Boltanski and Esquerre overestimate enrichment’s importance. Perhaps the latter is best understood as an exotic corner of present-day capitalism [...] My own candidate for contemporary capitalism’s dominant sector is finance. Despite its enormous weight and political consequence, finance receives scant attention from Boltanski and Esquerre” (Fraser 2017, 63).

Hardt and Negri’s *Assembly* analyses multiple dimensions of contemporary capitalism: finance capitalism, neoliberal capitalism, and digital/cognitive capitalism. Their analysis suggests that these dimensions interact. Although they do not say it explicitly, there are indications that they see cognitive and digital capitalism as the dominant form and that they therefore are closer to Boltanski and Esquerre than to Fraser in giving an answer to the question in what kind of capitalism we live today: The “dominant figures of property in the contemporary era – including code, images, cultural products, patents, knowledge, and the like – are largely immaterial and, more important, indefinitely reproducible” (Hardt and Negri 2017, 187).

Many critical theorists will be able to agree that capitalism is a dialectical unity of a diversity of dimensions and forms of capitalism that develop over time so that new aspects emerge, the relevance of certain aspects shifts, etc. (see Fuchs 2014, chapter 5). My view is that in order to decide which dimension is dominant at a specific point of time, we not just require theory and philosophy, but also need to empirically study various aspects of capitalism, which requires analysing primary and secondary data and applying Marx’s theory empirically.

For example, one concrete empirical phenomenon, where one can ask what dimensions of capitalism are present, are transnational corporations (TNCs). In 2014, 33.5% of the profits of the world’s largest 2,000 corporations were located in the finance, insurance and real estate sector, 19.0% in the mobility industries, 18.6% in manufacturing, and 17.3% in the information industry (see Fuchs 2016b, table 1). The data suggests that the structure of transnational corporations is to specific degrees shaped by finance capitalism, mobility capitalism, hyper-industrial capitalism and informational/communicative/digital capitalism. But all of these dimensions interact: Digital media corporations in Silicon Valley and other parts of the world receive huge injections of venture capital (a specific type of finance capital), aim at becoming listed on stock markets, and are prone to create financial bubbles, as the 2000 dot-com crisis showed. Digital communication advances and is at the same time a result of mobility and time-space compression (Harvey 1989). As a result, the transport of people and commodities has been growing. Digital commodities and digital commons are not weightless, but require not just information work, but also the physical labour of miners and assemblers in Africa and China, who are part of an international division of digital labour (Fuchs 2014). Finance capitalism, mobility capitalism, hyper-industrial capitalism and digital capitalism form a dialectical capitalist unity that consists of interrelated, contradictory moments. Capitalism is a unity of many capitalisms that develops dynamically and historically. A dimension that makes the picture even more complex is authoritarian capitalism, a form of capitalism that in recent times in the context of the economic and political crisis of capitalism has become strength-

ened, which poses the question how neoliberal capitalism and authoritarian capitalism are related (Fuchs 2018). Non-trivial questions emerge in this context that need to be addressed from a Marxian perspective: What is authoritarianism? What is authoritarian capitalism? How is it related to fascism, Nazism, right-wing extremism and nationalism? Is Trump an authoritarian personality, an authoritarian capitalist, a right-wing extremist, and a neo-fascist? How is the increased prevalence of right-wing extremism, authoritarianism and nationalism related to capitalist development (for a detailed analysis see Fuchs 2018).

Hardt and Negri stress the importance of the tradition of Western Marxism (72-76), especially Georg Lukács and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who are representatives of humanist Marxism. The focus on the human subject is indeed a parallel between Autonomist Marxism and humanist Marxism. Both are concerned with issues of subjectivity, social change and oppose dogmatic Marxism and Stalinism. Hardt and Negri stress that Merleau-Ponty advanced a “critique of Soviet dictatorship, which is presented as totalitarianism against subjectivity” (75). One should in this context however not forget that the early Merleau-Ponty (1947/1969) in *Humanism and Terror* justified Stalinist terror and defined it as a form of humanism. Later, he clearly moved away from this position and posited humanism against Stalinism.

Hardt and Negri argue that the tendency of the organic composition of capital should not be seen as a deterministic law that results in the breakdown of capitalism, but as a tendency that results in the rise of the general intellect in capitalism (112-114, 203-206) so that “the general intellect is becoming a protagonist of economic and social production” (114). Such a theoretical move shows the connections between *Das Kapital* and *Die Grundrisse*. There is therefore no need to stress “Marxism against *Das Kapital*” (72). It is much more constructive to focus on the continuities between both books. So for example the *Grundrisse*’s notion of general intellect reappears in *Das Kapital* as *allgemeine Arbeit* (general labour), *Gesamtarbeiter* (collective worker) and cognitive and communicative aspects of work (Fuchs 2016c, 30, 36-37, 53-54, 171-172, 192-193, 239-240, 334, 364). Also class struggle is not alien to *Das Kapital*, but an integral feature that Marx especially discusses in historical passages that focus on struggles about the length and intensity of the working day (see Fuchs 2016c, chapters 10 & 15). It is therefore no accident that political readings of *Das Kapital* have also emerged within Autonomist Marxism (Clever 2000).

3. Digital and Communicative Capitalism

Communication and communications have in Marxist theory traditionally been treated as a secondary, superstructural phenomenon of minor importance. As a consequence, the critical theory of communication is today almost entirely associated with Jürgen Habermas’ theory of communicative action that advances a dualist ontology that separates work from communication and the economy from the lifeworld (Fuchs 2016a). Hardt and Negri are among those critical theorists, who have given serious attention to the analysis of communication and the digital in capitalism. *Assembly* continues in this vein. The decisive point to make is not that everyone should agree with every aspect of their analysis or to claim that digitality is the dominant reality of capitalism, but that Hardt and Negri afford space and time to the analysis of communication and the digital. The analysis of communication and digital communication should not be left to the postmodernists, neoliberals, Habermasians and Luhman(n)iacs, but rather be approached from the perspective of Marxist theory (see Fuchs 2017, 2016a, 2016c, 2015b, 2014, 2011, 2008; Fuchs and Fisher 2015; Fuchs

and Mosco 2016a, 2016b). Hardt and Negri have made an important contribution to the foundations of the emergence of communicative and digital Marxism.

In *Assembly*, Hardt and Negri conceive of the digital as a contradictory realm that poses both potentials for domination and liberation. Digital communication plays a role throughout the entire book and is the specific focus of chapter 7. Although Hardt and Negri do not like the term dialectic, we can say that their analysis of digital communication is a manifestation of a dialectic critical theory of communication that is both opposed to the techno-determinism of techno-optimism and techno-pessimism (see Fuchs 2011, chapter 3, for a detailed discussion of this distinction).

Hardt and Negri oppose their analysis of technology to the approaches of Horkheimer/Adorno and Heidegger, whom they see as techno-pessimists (107-109). There are, however, three important differences between Horkheimer/Adorno and Heidegger:

- For Horkheimer and Adorno, capitalism's instrumental reason is the problem, not technology as such, whereas Heidegger opposes all modern technologies and longs for a pre-modern society without mass media, public transport and electronic communications.
- Adorno did not oppose technology and in less well known works grounded foundations of an alternative use of contemporary technologies for emancipatory purposes (Fuchs 2016a, chapter 3). A problem of the reception of Horkheimer and Adorno is that there is too much focus on the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment's* culture industry-chapter, which overlooks other works.
- The publication of Heidegger's *Schwarze Hefte* (Black Notebooks) has recently shown that his thought was profoundly anti-Semitic, whereas Adorno was a critical theorist of fascism and anti-Semitism and opposed fetishistic forms of thought and action (see Fuchs 2015a, 2015c)

Hardt and Negri discern among three phases of modern socio-technological development: automation, digitisation and digital algorithms. In the latter phase, algorithms play a key role in the organisation of exploitation, domination, administration, surveillance and the emergence of digital Taylorism (131-133).

Since 2009, there has been a debate about how to best understand digital prosumption and social media's targeted advertising-based capital accumulation models from a Marxist perspective. Categories such as productive labour, rent, rent-becoming-labour, reproductive labour and unproductive labour have in this context been utilised to the point of theoretical exhaustion (see Fuchs and Fisher 2015, Fuchs 2014, and especially chapter 5 in Fuchs 2015 for an overview of the most common arguments and counter-arguments in the digital labour debate). Hardt and Negri in *Assembly* take a clear position on these questions: "Social media too have discovered mechanisms to extract value from the social relationships and connections among users. Behind the value of data, in other words, stands the wealth of social relationships, social intelligence, and social production" (169). "Those astronomical stock valuations of digital and social media corporations are not just fictional. The corporations have sucked up vast reserves of social intelligence and wealth as fixed capital" (287). The "processes of expropriating value established by such algorithms are also increasingly open and social in a way that blurs the boundaries between work and life. Google users, for instance, are driven by interest and enjoyment, but even without their knowing it, their intelligence, attention, and social relations create value that can be captured" (119).

Yet exploitation, expropriation and domination are just one side of digital capitalism. Digital technologies are ambivalent and through the contradictory development

of the productive forces also advance the socialisation of work and increase the co-operative character of life and society. Hardt and Negri therefore oppose smashing digital machines. They argue for the “reappropriation of fixed capital, taking back control of the physical machines, intelligent machines, social machines, and scientific knowledges that were created by us in the first place, is one daring, powerful enterprise we could launch in that battle” (120). Appropriating fixed capital “is not a matter of struggling against or destroying machines or algorithms or any other forms in which our past production is accumulated, but rather wresting them back from capital, expropriating the expropriators, and opening that wealth to society” (287). Hardt and Negri stress the insight that given that technologies are made by humans, they shouldn’t be left to capital and the state as tools of domination, but should be transformed into tools of emancipation.

In later chapters of *Assembly*, it becomes evident that when speaking of the appropriation of fixed capital, Hardt and Negri have particularly the leaking of information (e.g. WikiLeaks), open access and the use of digital technologies in protests in mind (128, 214, 273, 294). Hardt and Negri’s analysis of the digital as contradictory is a contemporary manifestation of a dialectical analysis of technology. Marx grounded such a theory not just in the *Grundrisse*, but also in *Capital Volume 1*’s chapter on *Machinery and Large-Scale Industry* (see Fuchs 2016c, chapter 15). We need to add several qualifications to Hardt and Negri’s analysis of the digital (see especially Fuchs 2017):

- The history of alternative media is a history of precarious, self-exploitative labour that has to do with the conundrum that fighting within capitalism against and beyond capitalism requires resources, which are more difficult to obtain when you do not work for-profit, but in self-managed, autonomous co-operatives. We therefore also need left radical reformist media politics that together with media activism advance radical media reforms (such as the taxation of digital advertising and digital corporations, a participatory media fee that redistributes capital and advertising taxation through participatory budgeting to non-profit media, etc.).
- Given the dominance of individualism and the Californian neoliberal ideology in the digital industries and digital culture, there is a real danger that alternative projects (including free software, Wikipedia, WikiLeaks, platform coops, network commons, non-commercial open access, etc.) turn into lifestyle politics, individualistic clicktivism, the commodification of the digital commons and a libertarian form of capitalism. Such developments are no automatism, but are a danger that shows the need for political movements that strengthen and struggle for digital commonism.
- Alternative digital media are not limited to progressive, left-wing phenomena such as Altnet, Democracy Now, The Real News, etc. Also the far-right has established its own alternative digital media that act as alternatives to the liberal mainstream media. Some far-right digital media, such as Breitbart and Drudge Report, significantly exceed the popularity, visibility and attention that left-wing digital media achieve. Communication struggles therefore need to not just focus on how to challenge the capitalist mainstream media’s power, but also on how to fight against far-right media (Fuchs 2018).
- In the online world, the main power asymmetry does not concern the control of the means of digital production, but the capitalist attention economy: In the flood of information processed at high speed, alternative and critical knowledge has a much harder time to be visible and gain attention than the content advanced by tabloids, brands, corporations with large advertising budgets, celebrities, and en-

tainment corporations. Appropriating fixed capital therefore needs to entail the transformation of the digital towards a new logic that advances engagement, criticality and debate. We for example need online equivalents of Club 2¹, a new form of YouTube that becomes Club 2.0.

- Besides alternative media, there is also a tradition of public service media that to a certain degree resists the logic of commodification and profit, but in many countries is prone to political particularism. Just like the Left should take power differently, it should also struggle not just for alternative digital media, but also a public service Internet that transforms the structures of public service media.

4. Politics

Recent left-wing politics has seen a shift from the politics of occupations to the politics of movement-parties. The movements supporting Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn are the two most striking examples. Reflecting on the question what kind of strategy and tactics today can best advance struggles for a society of the commons, Hardt and Negri oppose one-sided left-wing politics. *Assembly* argues that leaderless horizontality, centralised party politics, prefigurative politics, radical reformism and revolutionary politics all have their limits, problems and pitfalls. Hardt and Negri make arguments for a dialectical politics that combines different forms, strategies and tactics of struggle.

In chapter 4, Hardt and Negri analyse contemporary far-right politics. The aim of contemporary right-wing movements is to “restore an imagined national identity that is primarily white, Christian, and heterosexual” (50). Hardt and Negri argue that contemporary far-right politics often imitates left-wing movements and are organised as leaderless and structureless movements so that they are different from classical right-wing movements. Donald Trump is arguably the most influential far-right politician today. Trump, who is with one mentioning almost absent in *Assembly*, certainly undermines established party-structures. But at the same time he has used money, ideology and popularity to build new structures. And he constitutes a new form of authoritarian, right-wing leadership, in which the power of big politics and big capital are fused in one person, the authoritarian spectacle mobilises citizens via reality TV and social media, and a narcissistic self-branding machine engages in constant friend/enemy-politics that takes symbolic political violence to a new level (see Fuchs 2018). Trump is a non-trivial far-right phenomenon that is neither completely new nor completely old, but a development of the strategy and tactics of the far-right.

Hardt and Negri argue both against leaderless horizontality that rejects organisation and institutions and against centralised authority in progressive movements. “Theoretical investigations, for instance, of the increasingly general intellectual, affective, and communicative capacities of the labor force, sometimes coupled with arguments about the potentials of new media technologies, have been used to bolster the assumption that activists can organize spontaneously and have no need for institutions of any sort” (7). Political leaders of social movements have often been repressed externally by violence and ideology (9) and internally by anti-authoritarianism (9-10). Hardt and Negri also oppose vanguard parties and pure electoral parties. “Progressive electoral parties, in the opposition and in power, can tactically have positive effects, but as a complement to not a substitute for the movements” (8). They call for an inversion of roles that gives “*strategy to the movements and tactics to the*

¹ See: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Club_2, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/After_Dark_\(TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/After_Dark_(TV_series))

leadership" (18). They speak of tactical leadership as leadership that is "limited to short-term action and tied to specific occasions" (19). Hardt and Negri make an argument that social movements should "strive not to take power as it is but to take power differently" (xiii-xiv). Taking power entails building new institutions beyond representative democracy and building new democratic institutions. The two authors stress the complex relation of centralised Power (potestas/pouvoir/poder/Macht) and power as potential (potentia/puissance/potencia/Vermögen).

Hardt and Negri argue for a political strategy that combines prefigurative politics, antagonistic reformism and taking power to overthrow existing institutions and create new democratic ones (274-280). Employing just one of these forms of politics often faces problems and limits. *Assembly* argues for the complementarity of the three political strategies: "The taking of power, by electoral or other means, must serve to open space for autonomous and prefigurative practices on an ever-larger scale and nourish the slow transformation of institutions, which must continue over the long term. Similarly practices of exodus must find ways to complement and further projects of both antagonistic reform and taking power" (278). Example projects that such a complementary left-wing politics could struggle for include guaranteed basic income as "a money of the common" (294) and "open access to and democratic management of the common" (294). Such a form of left-wing politics constitutes a new Machiavellian Prince that does not put Power, but the common first (chapter 13).

In more concrete terms, Hardt and Negri argue for a politics of left-wing convergence, in which unions and social movements converge into social unionism that organises social strikes against the exploitation of the social production of the common. Isn't the left-wing politics that Hardt and Negri argue for a kind of Luxemburgism 2.0 in the age of the social production of the common? Rosa Luxemburg in her time argued against Eduard Bernstein's pure parliamentary social democratic reformism. She opposed anarchist individualism and propagated using the mass strike as political tactic. Luxemburg neither rejected nor fetishised parliamentary politics. She rejected Leninist vanguard party politics and argued for organising the spontaneity of protest. She opposed war, imperialism and nationalism with internationalist politics. She saw that the limitation of democracy in post-revolutionary Russia was a serious shortcoming that would create major problems. Luxemburg argued for dialectics of party/movements, organisation/spontaneity, leader/masses (see Luxemburg 2008). The point, where we need to transcend Luxemburg's politics today is that she was very sceptical about the feasibility of autonomous projects, especially co-operatives. Self-management cannot start from nothing in a new society. It needs social forms that germinate in capitalism and produce seeds that as a common point beyond profit and wage-labour.

Hardt and Negri oppose both neoliberal entrepreneurship that resonates "especially in the digital world of dotcoms and start-ups" (142) and social entrepreneurship that is a "social neoliberalism" (145) that outsources welfare state to voluntary action, charities, and communities. "The nexus of social neoliberalism and social entrepreneurship destroy community networks and autonomous modes of cooperation that support social life" (146).

Hardt and Negri understand politics as not just taking place on the streets, in factories, squares and offices, but also in the realm of language and communication. They argue that we must politically take and transform the meaning of words and argue that "transforming words themselves, giving them new meanings" (151) is part of political struggle. "Sometimes this involves coining new terms but more often it is a matter of taking back and giving new significance to existing ones" (151). "Indeed

one of the central tasks of political thought is to struggle over concepts, to clarify and transform their meaning” (xix)

In this vein, Hardt and Negri argue for transforming the meaning of entrepreneurship. Chapter 9 is dedicated to the “Entrepreneurship of the Multitude”. “It is important to claim the concept of entrepreneurship for our own” and not leave it to neoliberal managers and gurus (xix). By the “democratic entrepreneurship of the multitude”, Hardt and Negri understand the politics of social unionism (social movements + unions) that organises social strikes. Social unions entails “organizing new social combinations, inventing new forms of social cooperation, generating democratic mechanisms for our access to, use of, and participation in decision-making about the common” (xix). The entrepreneurship of the multitude aims at “self-organization and self-governance” (146). “Social unionism [...] by combining the organizational structures and innovations of labor unions and social movements, is able to give form to the entrepreneurship of the multitude and the potential for revolt that is inherent in social production” (224).

The transformation of meanings associated with words as political strategy can certainly work for terms such as democracy, freedom, liberty, human rights, or the republic. But does it work for the term entrepreneurship? Or the nation? Or capitalism? It would for example be absurd and confusing to argue that we need to construct communism as a different capitalism. The word “capitalism” is so much engrained with the meanings of exploitation and class that trying to appropriate it might very well turn out to be counterproductive. So what about the meaning of entrepreneur, entrepreneurial and entrepreneurialism?

Ernst Bloch suggests fighting the Nazis and fascism should also entail symbolic struggles over words so that communists and socialist appropriate the words that fascists use and give them a different meaning. He argued that the words home and homeland (*Heimat*) should not be left to the fascists, but be used differently: Capitalism alienates humans from society, nature and themselves as their home. Socialism (or what today we could call commonism or a commons-based democracy) is in contrast for Bloch a true homeland that overcomes capitalism and the particularism of nationalist homeland ideology:

“But the root of history is the working, creating human being who reshapes and overhauls the given facts. Once he has grasped himself and established what is his, without expropriation and alienation, in real democracy, there arises in the world something which shines into the childhood of all and in which no one has yet been: homeland” (Bloch 1995, 1375-1376).

Hardt and Negri are like Ernst Bloch intransigent optimists, who use the construction of hope as a political weapon in the struggle for alternatives and believe in creating concrete utopias of the common as projects of class struggle. Commonism is a not-yet. The struggles of the multitude are the struggle for realising a political not-yet.

In countries, where right-wing extremists win elections and are a major threat, giving a progressive meaning to the terms home and homeland is a feasible political tactic in order to try to win over protest voters who are afraid of social decline. The far-right populist Norbert Hofer almost won the 2016 Austrian presidential election. His party, the Freedom Party (FPÖ), has for many years campaigned against immigration by presenting migrants as a threat to the Austrian homeland. Figures 1 and 2 show two examples, in which Islam and Moroccan immigrants are presented as criminals and enemies to the homeland.



Figure 1: Election poster of the Freedom Party of Austria (“Love of the Homeland instead of Moroccan Thieves”)



Figure 2: Election poster of the Freedom Party of Austria (“Homeland instead of Islam”)

The Green Party candidate Alexander Van der Bellen in the 2016 Austrian presidential election appropriated the term homeland and gave a different meaning to it: Social security and solidarity (see figures 3 and 4). He won the run-off election against Hofer and became Austrian president. Constructing a different meaning of the word “home” was used as linguistic and communicative tactic to counter the threat of far-right politics. Under specific political conditions, such as the presence of strong right-

wing extremist parties, culture jamming, linguistic détournement and semiotic struggle form a feasible method of political struggle.



Figure 3: Election poster of Alexander Van der Bellen in the Austrian Presidential Election 2016 (“Homeland needs solidarity”)



Figure 4: Election poster of Alexander Van der Bellen in the Austrian Presidential Election 2016 (“Those who love our homeland, do not divide it”)

But can the same strategy work for the word entrepreneurship? The term entrepreneur comes from the Old French *entreprendre* that means to undertake and begin something. The term was introduced to the English language in the early 19th century. In the world of classical political economy, Jean-Baptiste Say introduced the term of the entrepreneur in the early 19th century in his book *A Treatise of Political Economy (Traité d'économie politique)* that was first published in 1803: The entrepreneur “employs, disposes of, and wholly consumes” capital, “but in a way that reproduces it, and that with profit” (Say 1971/1821, 113). 200 years later, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* understands entrepreneurs as the “business class” and the entrepreneur as the “businessman” (Cornwall 2010). It claims that economic growth takes place “under the leadership of an entrepreneurial class”. Entrepreneurs according to this understanding undertake “enterprise investment” that aims at the “growth in labour productivity and GNP” (Cornwall 2010).

Over more than 200 years, the term entrepreneur has been used in an individualistic and capitalistic manner for signifying an individual capitalist who invests and accumulates capital and exploits workers. Is it realistic that now the different political meaning of social unionism can be given successfully to this bourgeois term that signifies individualism and capitalism? There are certain terms that are so corrupted that they should better be discarded than appropriated. It would also not make sense to try to redefine what capitalism is and to give a new meaning to this term. The effect would be that everyone would think one justifies capitalism and does not want to abolish it. We need some words that signify what we oppose. Capitalism and entrepreneurialism are among these negative terms that cannot in a meaningful way undergo a determinate linguistic negation. The risk of appropriating the terms entrepreneur, entrepreneurial and entrepreneurship for progressive purposes is that it is misunderstood as encouraging the commodification of activism. Social unionism is an important political strategy, but it can be called by that name. We do not need a bourgeois category for it. Why do we for instance not instead of speaking of political entrepreneurship and the entrepreneurship of the multitude, use as Paolo Gerbaudo (2012) suggests, the terms political choreography and the choreographers of the multitude?

5. Conclusion

Hardt and Negri's *Assembly* is an important intervention into contemporary politics. It advances a critical analysis of contemporary capitalism that is shaped by neoliberalism, finance capital, nationalism, right-wing extremism, the common, co-operation, immaterial labour, the digital, algorithms, digital labour, digital assemblages, digital domination, and digitally mediated social struggles. Hardt and Negri are ruthless critics of capitalism and bureaucracy as well as intransigent optimists, who care about the next steps in progressive social movement politics.

Assembly argues for rethinking left-wing strategies and tactics. Its authors criticise one-sided approaches and argue for dialectics of movement/leadership, spontaneity/organisation, revolution/reform. The appropriation of fixed capital is an important feature of the suggested strategy and tactics. Hardt and Negri term this politics the new Prince and the entrepreneurship of the multitude.

The key strength of the book is the multitude of dimensions, ideas and provocations that the analysis advances, which makes it a book that will be read by many activists, citizens, scholars and other (im)material workers, who care about a better future and are looking for ways to transform society in progressive ways. *Assembly* is

a brave and intelligent intervention that will influence our debates, struggles, theories, critiques, praxis, strategies and tactics in the coming years.

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About the Author

Christian Fuchs is a critical theorist of communication and society. He is professor at the University of Westminster and co-editor of the journal *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* (<http://www.triple-c.at>). @fuchschristian <http://www.triple-c.at>