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Empire

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In the present climate, where the drumbeat of war is overwhelming in our ears, it may be salutary to think in a more abstract way about the nature of American imperial power. Hardt and Negri’s book, written before the onset of the Bush government, before 9/11 and before Iraq, reminds us powerfully of the stage at which the American Empire found itself at the beginning of the new millennium.

Using Foucault, Hardt and Negri assert that the ‘disciplinary’ society of the past, in which a social command structure of institutions and apparatuses predominated, has been replaced by another form of power. This new power, at the heart of the new imperial stage, they term the ‘society of control’. In this world, brave or not, they see an intensification of control which extends well outside the usual structures of governance into the body itself. What they mean by this is that power is no longer an external force, imposing itself from the outside on the individual, but rather a force of the self, accepted and integrated into the person, and agreed to by constituent individuals of a biopolitical society.

Extending Foucault’s theorems, and making use of Deleuze and Guattari’s work, they go further. This is a world of managed subjectivities, where the attitudes of the day are in the hands of Fox news and talk radio. Any possible manipulation of public opinion is at hand, even though deep cynicism accompanies the rise of biopolitical society. Thus, instead of the political-economic machinery of the past, or the military industrial complex of the Eisenhower era, we are presently in the realm of the political-economic-communicative complex, in which thoughts beliefs and attitudes are as equally under imperial control as the oil fields and the territory of Iraq.

Hardt is a professor of Cultural Studies at Duke, with a background in literature; Negri an Italian philosopher. That neither locate themselves in the traditional disciplines of empire-watchers – history; sociology; political science – is perhaps itself of importance. The rise of a new discipline which smashes the old categories of thought, to use Julia Kristeva’s phrase, is equally appealing.
Cultural Studies has grabbed large chunks of the most interesting intellectual terrain from a variety of sources over the last twenty years. The brilliance of this book is testimony to its success.

But I am especially excited about the style of the book and what one might call its grandeur. The book itself is imperial, commanding the intellectual heights with a tone that brooks little debate. This book has attitude! It firmly and calmly reshapes the way we have been thinking about globalization, economic power and domination. As we reach a new stage in global history, when the tectonic plates of control are moving as we write, it is useful to have new theoretical instruments at hand to make sense of it all.

I recommend *Empire* as an antidote to the simple solution or the hackneyed reaction to the new global landscape. It is a thoughtful and provocative intervention into the most important argument being held at present, and it contributes to a better understanding of the hawks of war and the chances for the doves of peace.

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