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Nicholas Thoburn<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article explores the different models of political communication that inhere in Hardt and Negri's *Empire* trilogy, models that are explicit and implicit, intended and accidental, dominant and latent. From their existence tangled up in Hardt and Negri's work, I draw out for consideration the communicative models of the rhizome-book, manifesto, textbook, mass-market book, autonomous language, and political journal. My aim is less to evaluate the relative dominance of these models in the trilogy, than to take the opportunity this work offers for thinking political communication as specifically communist problematic, a somewhat neglected field of inquiry.

## Keywords

political communication, political media, Hardt and Negri, autonomist, manifesto

It is, I think, fair to say that Hardt and Negri are not especially interested in articulating a theory of political communication. They do of course have a developed theory of the place of communication in contemporary capitalism—and one not without effects on their communicative voice—but that is something different. In the *Empire* trilogy, one will not find an equivalent of Lenin's (1973) formulation of the organizational role of the party newspaper and its performative projection a “complete and all-embracing political line” (p. 201). Neither in these books is there a political economy of radical media on a par, say, with the *Comedia* (1984) thesis, with its critical assessment of the parochialism of activist media and its advocacy of left accommodation with commercial publishing norms. Nonetheless, *Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth*, as any other texts, are governed by patterns of communication that have political effects,

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whether or not they are overtly identified and reflexively articulated. And Hardt and Negri do in fact offer some minimal reflection on the nature of the communicative models their books put into play. There is material to interrogate, then, if one is interested, as I am here, in assessing the models of political communication that inhere in Hardt and Negri's trilogy, models that are explicit and implicit, intended and accidental, dominant and latent. This essay is a sketch of these models. From their existence tangled up in Hardt and Negri's work, I draw out for consideration the communicative models of the rhizome-book, manifesto, textbook, mass-market book, autonomous language, and political journal. My aim is less to evaluate the relative dominance of these models in the *Empire* trilogy than to take the opportunity this work offers for thinking political communication as a specifically communist problematic, a somewhat neglected field of inquiry.

An initial inspection of *Empire* might suggest that my opening observation is misguided. For Hardt and Negri state in an introductory footnote that they take Marx's *Capital* and Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* as models for the book, works that in their different ways are highly inventive in form, and in a fashion that is self-conscious and expressly political. Echoing Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) advice for a nonlinear reading of their "rhizome-book," Hardt and Negri (2000, p. xvi) write that *Empire* "can be read in many different ways: from front to back, back to front, in pieces, in a hopscotch pattern, or through correspondences." Yet *Empire*, and the trilogy more generally, actually adopts a most linear model of diagnosis and presentation, mapping the emergence through time of *Empire*, its countersubject of the multitude, and the latter's substance, immaterial labor and the common. As such, the textual model that comes to mind is more that of the "manifesto," however much these texts (at a combined 1,300 pages) exceed in length what that form would normally bear.

The manifesto is a curious communicative form. It seeks to construct a political subject in its pages and beyond through the diagnosis and presentation of the subject's historical emergence and future actualization, a projected future flourishing which in turn lends authority to the text in the present where the subject is lacking (Puchner, 2005). In interview, Hardt and Negri shy away from a full identification with this communicative model, but in a manner that rather confirms its presence in their texts as a kind of latency or potential, especially if one recalls that *Multitude* is precisely concerned with designating the revolutionary subjectivity adequate to imperial power:

You rightly point out it is difficult to distinguish between the two, but this is certainly a theoretical manifesto more than it is a political manifesto. Our book [*Empire*] points toward the necessity of an alternative to the contemporary imperial order, but a political manifesto would have to articulate the subject and the structures that would animate such an alternative. Today that is still, perhaps, beyond our grasp. (Hardt & Negri in Brown, Szeman, Hardt, & Negri, 2002, p. 190)

I do not want to be excessively down on manifestos. For I am attracted in part by Badiou's (2007, pp. 139, 138) formulation that a manifesto is a "rhetorical envelope" that protects and nurtures "something other than what it overtly names or announces." Its function is not to realize its promise per se, but to "devote every energy" to the otherwise "precarious and almost indistinct" nature of real action in the present: "we should not be surprised by the correlation between vanishing works and staggering programmes" (Badiou, 2007, pp. 140, 239). And yet the manifesto is a decidedly 20th-century communicative mode, one made increasingly redundant not only by the waning of its affect caused by overrepetition, but also because of its inherent association with avant-garde models of privileged subjectivity and command—as often as not, these "staggering programmes" have been correlated with subjective forms that are as equally staggering in their pompous self-regard. But even if this was not so, and Badiou was correct, would it not be more productive to deploy textual models with a more intrinsic or resonant relation to the politics that they name and extend? Guided by this kind of question, Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) research suggests that the manifesto is an exemplary case of the "root-book" or "state apparatus-book," that which the rhizome-book seeks to undo. Self-enclosed in the truth of the subject it posits, the root-book claims to reflect the world's nature and historical trajectory, but as such it constitutes a pristine *separation* from the world and all that would trouble the book's certainty and subject. It is an ultimately authoritarian structure that is more in keeping with religious than communist models of textual productivity and association since the latter is necessarily immersed in the world's aleatory dynamics and emergent possibilities. When Žižek (2001) criticizes *Empire* for its deployment of Deleuzian "jargon" he would be wrong, then, to view it as an expression of Deleuzian *form*, for this would require that uncomfortable questions be asked of the essentially religious structures that it embodies—not that in this Hardt and Negri's work is alone.

A third model of communication that inheres in the trilogy is that of the "textbook." In an enthralling extended conversation with Cesare Casarino, Negri remarks that *Empire* began life in part as a textbook on modern sovereignty—the series in which it was to be included was canceled, but the plan fed into the first two parts of *Empire* (Casarino & Negri, 2008). If elements of the synthesizing and overtly pedagogical style of the textbook are present in the trilogy, they are for Hardt and Negri part of the deliberately popular style that is courted here (Casarino & Negri, 2008; Thoburn, 2006). As they preface *Multitude*, "We have made every effort to write this in a language that everybody can understand" (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. xvii).

Pause for a moment in front of the peculiar (though not necessarily unpleasant) image of an autonomist textbook, before the picture becomes even stranger when we read Negri's remark that "*Multitude* was meant to be a book that could be sold on the supermarket shelves!" (in Casarino & Negri, 2008, p. 111). And yet the two forms—popular writing and mass-market book commodity—are closely associated. As Megan Morris (1996) has argued with regard to aspects of British Cultural Studies, self-consciously "popular" radical approaches have a tendency to emotional and theoretical simplification that can produce an abstract subject of feel-good resistance and a generic

mass audience that is often more associated with publishing booms—the intense but ephemeral passion and simultaneous delimitation of the critical field that is the commodity form of humanities research—than it is with the affectively complex process of situated and engaged political writing. Hardt and Negri's trilogy has certainly had considerable productive impact in political circles, but the career of these works has also been determined by this commercial structure, a boom and bust cycle of consumption in which the academy, to its great detriment, excels. This should not really be a surprise, for such patterns of consumption are far from alien to the medium of the book, a medium entwined with the emergence and subsequent history of the commodity form. The modern book has not only been instrumental in the division of intellectual and manual labor that lies at the heart of abstract labor, but also was itself the first uniform and iterable mass-produced commodity (Anderson, 1983).

This conjunction of popular writing, publishing booms, and the book commodity poses problems to communist thought and its sites and models of communication that I fear Negri too easily elides in his championing (albeit a little teasingly) of the supermarket book. But this is not a mere lapse of attention, for it has a philosophical basis in Hardt and Negri's understanding of the place and form of communication in contemporary capitalism. There is an argument running through the trilogy that labor is becoming increasingly self-organizing and autonomous from capital, where the latter functions as an external mechanism of capture and no longer as an orchestrating power (Thoburn, 2001). This is the principal agency of Hardt and Negri's narrative, where—and they employ this orthodox Marxist framework—the redundant relations of production are blown open by an insurgent forces of production: “Labor tends to be increasingly autonomous from capitalist command, and thus capital's mechanisms of expropriation and control become fetters that obstruct productivity” (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 173). It is of course much the same historical narrative that mobilizes the *Communist Manifesto* (though less so *Capital* or other of Marx's mature works—or, indeed, classic works of operaismo such as those of Raniero Panzieri, which show how this orthodox framework tends to be an apologia for state socialist variants of capitalism). The difference with the *Communist Manifesto* is that for Hardt and Negri, as the quotation above suggests, labor is already largely autonomous from capital, at least in its essential dynamics.

Language has a key place in this formulation. It is central to the “immaterial labor”—the collective modulation of sign, code, affect—that they consider the dominant labor form today. But language functions also for Hardt and Negri as a synecdoche of the self-organizing dynamics of labor as a whole: “the foundational component of the concept of multitude is ... a concept of singularities that continuously reassemble and reconfigure themselves into a language” (Negri, in Casarino & Negri, 2008, p. 126). One can now understand why Hardt and Negri pay little attention to the relation of writing and language to commodity forms, or, indeed, to the nature of political communication. For if labor tends toward autonomy from capital, and language is emblematic of that autonomous labor, then the popular and fecund proliferation and expansion

of language—whatever form it takes: in direct speech, in labor, in the book—is an expression of communist potentiality.

It is really most striking how different this position is to that held by Deleuze (1995, p. 175), who remarks in conversation with Negri that “speech and communication” are “thoroughly permeated by money—and not by accident but by their very nature.” Deleuze shares this approach with Adorno (2005) and his assault on “the word coined by commerce” (p. 101). For both, the situation requires a response that breaks with the false (or capitalist) universality of popular expression and demands an intimate attention to the form of communication:

When public opinion has reached a state in which thought inevitably becomes a commodity, and language the means of promoting that commodity, then the attempt to trace the course of such depravation has to deny any allegiance to current linguistic and conceptual conventions, lest their world-historical consequences thwart it entirely. (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1976, pp. xi-xii)

This position is not itself without serious difficulties,<sup>1</sup> but it is surely from such recognition of the colonization of expressive forms by capitalist structures that the problem of the communist voice, of communist models of communication, needs to be posed.<sup>2</sup>

There is at least one other communicative model to be found in the *Empire* trilogy, that of the “political journal.” Negri remarks to Casarino that alongside the textbook commission, a second occasion that motivated the writing of *Empire* was the series of political and theoretical events and debates that constituted the French journal *Futur Antérieur* (1989-1998). In a beautiful short text about this journal, Negri (n.d.) describes how it held together an unstable and fraught conjunction of French and Italian political thought through a series of events—the fall of the Soviet bloc, the left’s substitution of social democracy for Stalinism, immigrant struggles—as political theory and practice were woven together in pushing toward a reconstruction of communism. This is the intensive field where postautonomist philosophies of immaterial labor, biopolitics, multitude, the common, and so on were born and tested. The political journal as it emerges in Negri’s text is a mode of communication not constituted through a synthesis in book or manifesto, but through an intensive, collective endeavor, one that is “aleatory,” “contradictory,” and “groping in the dark” (Negri, n.d., n.p.). It is an enunciative mode not without passion, but it is a *geophilosophical* passion rather different to that of publishing booms:

This journal had a soul—a passionate soul which tried to absorb everything in the world around it which offered theoretical interest, a political choice, an ethical dimension, or simply a joy of life. The soul of a journal is its radical determination to give meaning to everything it touches, to build it into a theoretical tendency, to embrace it within a mechanism of practical activity. (Negri, n.d., n.p.)

So, is there an autonomist model of political communication? It is a question that exceeds what I can fully address here, but I have posed this essay in such a fashion to ward off the tendency to isolate Hardt and Negri's trilogy as a self-enclosed work and to displace debates about the trilogy into a broader set of problems regarding the nature and constraints of political communication. My provisional answer is that an autonomist model of political communication needs to have a close association with the kinds of immersive, intensive, and collective expression of which *Futur Antérieur* was an example, what I have elsewhere characterized as a "minor politics" (Thoburn, 2003). Books, even solitary writers, are not alien to this politics, but the seductions and constraints of the manifesto, the textbook, and the book commodity must be attended to and carefully handled, even if the occasional work of synthesis certainly has its uses. For if the autonomist current has any real point of consistency, it is surely that the primacy of struggle in any one conjunction is discerned, assessed, and modulated through a critical immanence with that struggle, not through concepts abstracted from it and generalized as idea-commodities. But an excursus on the nature of political communication should not limit its purview to any one school or current. As far as I have been able in limited space, my aim here has been to draw on a range of resources toward the development of a *communist* understanding of political communication. This should be capable both of groping toward new forms of political expression and posing critique of its milieu of emergence, in this case that of Hardt and Negri's trilogy and its tangle of models of political communication.

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### **Notes**

1. Fears of an elitist bent to this thesis are somewhat confirmed by the "Not Half Hungry" aphorism that immediately follows Adorno's critique of language as commerce, though the dismissal of working class speech in Adorno's text has no place in Deleuze and Guattari (1988), whose "minor literature" thesis accords the language of the oppressed a central place in the politics of expression.
2. Negri's work in the 1970s was more in keeping with this framework, and a critique of the capital/communication nexus had an important place in the expressive forms of the autonomia movement more widely, most especially in Bologna's Radio Alice (Thoburn, 2006).

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## Bio

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