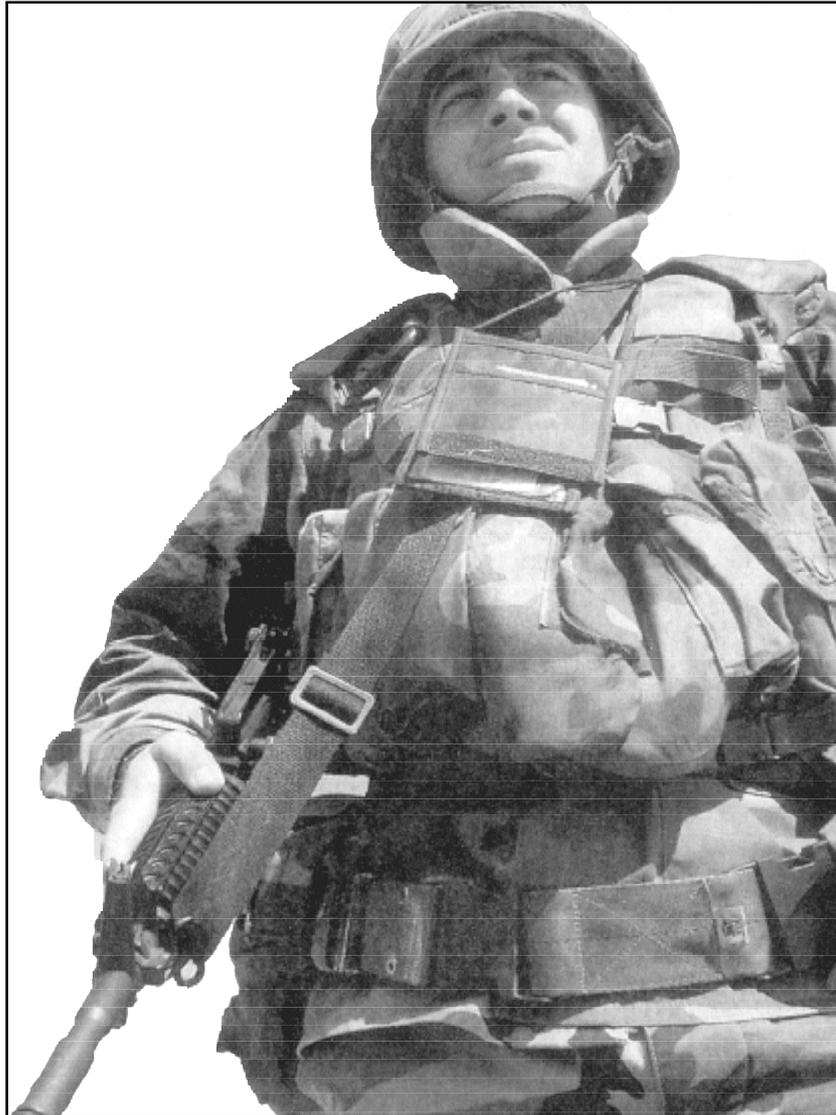


# Two critiques: "Empire" and "new imperialism"



By Martin Thomas

**A**MONG THE books most cited in the so-called “anti-globalisation” movement is one which is emphatically *not* anti-globalisation. In *Empire*, Toni Negri and Michael Hardt declare: “The strategy of local resistance misidentifies and thus masks the enemy.

“We are by no means opposed to the globalisation of relationships as such...

The enemy, rather, is a specific regime of global relations we call Empire... [The] strategy of defending the local is damaging because it obscures and even negates the real alternatives and the potentials for liberation that exist within Empire. We should be done once and for all with the search for an outside, a standpoint that imagines a purity for our politics... The multitude, in its will to be-against and its desire for liberation, must push through Empire to come out the other side”.

Negri and Hardt “find [the] Third Worldist perspective inadequate because it ignores the innovations and antagonisms of labour in the First and Second Worlds” (p. 264). Rejecting the idea that “if capitalist domination is becoming ever more global, then our resistances to it must defend the local and construct barriers to capital’s accelerating flows” (p.44), they explain that “increasingly, any kind of isolation and separation will mean only a more brutal kind of domination by the global system, a reduction to powerlessness and poverty” (p.284).

The world is not an American empire, from which “isolation” or “separation” would mean national liberation. Wars like the Gulf War of 1991 are “imperial wars”, wars to maintain the fabric on which the world market rests, rather than “imperialist wars” in the old sense of wars aiming to add, retain, or redivide territory for colonial or semi-colonial empires.

Some passages in the book almost suggest “critical support” for Empire. “Our political task, we will argue, is not simply to resist these processes [of globalisation] but to reorganise them and redirect them toward new ends” (p.xv). According to Negri, moreover: “The United States is something different; it does not know imperialism... It is... substantially, an anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist, democratic country” (*Il Manifesto*, 17 April 1999; the book carries the same idea.)

Yet Negri’s conclusion from his eulogy of the democratic traditions of the USA was not support for NATO in the war it was then waging against Slobodan Milosevic’s Serbia, over Kosova, but “refusing to be cannon fodder for Milosevic and for NATO”.

In *Le Monde* (27 January 2002) Negri explained himself better: “Globalisation has not been provoked by the Americans’ unlimited thirst for power... It is completely stupid to be anti-American. We have to go beyond this false vision which makes the American government the sole enemy. The American government is the most important of the powers we must contest, but not the only one. It would not exist if the other ruling classes of world capitalism did not give it their unflinching support. The problem of the mobilisation of the American workers is the most important struggle that the movement against neo-liberalism must deal with”.

Excellent! But then what does Negri mean by the “mobilisation of the American workers”? Here lies a problem. This article will discuss the issues round “globalisation” by way of two critiques, of Negri-Hardt and of the “new imperialism” theory of John Rees, Alex Callinicos and other writers associated with the British SWP as “the new imperialism”.

## World markets

**T**ODAY, WORLD markets — not just markets in goods and services, but, as important, credit markets — create vast and increasing inequalities. They convey the choicest fruits of the world’s labour to the billionaires in the global centres of finance. They are regulated by the IMF, the WTO, the World Bank — international institutions dominated by the ruling classes centred in those “global cities”.

At every stage of market haggling — who gets contracts, where investment is

sited and on what terms, which trade barriers remain (as they do, lower than in the past, but still there, including around the most ruthlessly “free-trading” states, like the USA), who gets loans on what terms, how debt will be repaid — economic, political, diplomatic and military might skews the scales.

Historically, inside each state, capitalist classes tend to use market mechanisms rather than the politico-personal dependence through which exploitation is organised in feudal, tribute-paying, and slave systems. But they need much larger establishments of police, standing armies, and state bureaucrats than the previous exploiting classes. So also today the world order is policed by larger military machines than the old imperialism of giant colonial empires was, outside world war.

Yet the core exploitative mechanisms are those embedded in free trade itself.

In his speech *On The Question Of Free Trade*, Marx explained: “What is free trade under the present condition of society? It is freedom of capital... Gentlemen! Do not allow yourselves to be deluded by the abstract word freedom. Whose freedom? It is not the freedom of one individual in relation to another, but the freedom of capital to crush the worker..”

“We have shown what sort of brotherhood free trade begets between the different classes of one and the same nation. The brotherhood which free trade would establish between the nations of the earth would hardly be more fraternal. To call cosmopolitan exploitation universal brotherhood is an idea that could only be engendered in the brain of the bourgeoisie. All the destructive phenomena which unlimited competition gives rise to within one country are reproduced in more gigantic proportions on the world market..”

“If the free traders cannot understand how one nation can grow rich at the expense of another, we need not wonder, since these same gentlemen also refuse to understand how within one country one class can enrich itself at the expense of another”.

Vast pauperisation, abrupt destruction of social safeguards, arrogant domination by a few billionaires — that is the world capitalist system today, as destructive as the old colonial empires, and maybe in a more widespread and drastic way.

Yet it also generates vast potentials for subversion. The wage-working class, defined as those who sell their labour-power to capital and are exploited by capital, together with the children and retired people of that class, is probably a bigger proportion of the world’s population than ever before — about one third<sup>1</sup>. Although the reshaping of the world after the big crises of 1974-5 and 1979-80 was carried through by ruling classes thirsty for revenge against the labour movements which had scared them in the late 1960s and in the 1970s — with privatisations, welfare cuts, anti-union laws — there are possibly more workers in independent trade unions worldwide today than ever before in history.

There has been an enormous cheapening and speeding-up of freight, transport and communications. This is the era of mass international air travel, mass international telephone communication, and the Internet. Speedy and regular international communications used to be the preserve of the well-off. Now they are available to labour movements and workers.

To try to make capital less multifarious, more rigidly channeled is hopeless. To try to force world trade back into its old mould, to bemoan the speeding-up of global interchanges, or to try to return the new working classes to peasant production, is to turn our back on the subversive possibilities in the new order. The path of battle for which it creates the basis, and which can effectively point beyond it to a better future, is workers’ control, the political economy of the working class, the establishment of worldwide social standards and rights by international working-class action, and the struggle for worldwide socialist rev-

olution, and global democracy.

Every right of national self-determination, every other broad democratic right, is an important stepping stone for that battle.

If, however, we misidentify the mechanisms of capitalist market exploitation as merely operations of privilege secured by political and military means; if we shut our eyes to, or misunderstand, what is new about the modern imperialism of free trade; if we interpret it as just a slightly different form of the old imperialism of colonial empires — then we will go wrong.

To rid a nation of colonial rule is a step forward. To withdraw a national economy from the world market is a step backwards.

Cuba is kept largely outside the circuits of global trade and capital flows; but that is its curse, not its boon. We demand the end of the US blockade!

Marx himself, back in 1848, followed his critique of free trade with a warning. “Do not imagine, gentlemen, that in criticising freedom of trade we have the least intention of defending the system of protection”. Where tariffs and trade restrictions served rational capitalist purposes, explained Marx, they were only a means for a government to help local capitalists develop sufficient scale to enter the world market. Otherwise, they were conservative measures, in contrast to which free trade, by pushing forward the contradictions of capitalist production, would hasten the social revolution.

### States and markets

UNTIL RECENT decades, many or most of the less-developed countries were feudalistic regimes, colonies, semi-colonies (sometimes, the colonial or semi-colonial rule imposed because the big power most interested could not secure a reliable pro-capitalist government otherwise); in the later 20th century, Stalinist states or “substitutionist” state-capitalist regimes where bureaucratic or military elites, driven by competition and emulation with other powers, set up structures to foster a national industrial base and private capital under their wing. The pattern of world trade was one of raw materials being exported from less capitalistically developed countries to the metropolis in Western Europe or the USA, most of manufacturing industry being based in the metropolis, and manufactured goods being exported back to the less capitalistically developed countries.

That pattern has pretty much broken down. All but the very poorest states have more bourgeois ruling-class substance behind them. They are integrated into the world market. Manufactured goods predominate in world trade, and in the exports of less capitalistically developed countries. The biggest exporter of bulk raw materials is the USA, the most developed country. We have a world made up mostly of bourgeois states integrated into the world market in complex and multiple ways. They include substantial sectors integrated into production networks stretching over several countries.

The USA is the world's only superpower; but this is a world of politically independent capitalist states, and of international structures (UN, IMF, WTO, EU, G8, NATO) gaining more clout than before. States, far from fading away, act vigorously to reshape and adapt economies, but with world markets in view rather than self-complete national plans. Money-capital flies round the world faster than ever, international investment and contracting-out increase, and many more countries have become significantly industrialised, but the world becomes more unequal, not more uniform.

Colonialism became, in general, too costly and risky for the big powers in the decades after World War Two, as the colonies became more urban, educated and industrial. In a world of “universalised” capitalism, they know that trying to

impose governor-generals is an expensive, risky and fragile method of providing assistance to their corporations in the world market. So long as there are capitalist states in every country, or at least in every economically important country, with a sufficient bourgeois class basis to ensure a minimum of regularity in functioning by capitalist criteria, then that assistance can be ensured much more cheaply and reliably by market forces and para-market forces (haggling over trade concessions and contracts, bargaining over credit, bribery — at the limit, economic sanctions).

US “globocop” war or military action is the back-up. Since 1991 it has been used mostly to police the state fabric of the world — to maintain a smooth network of capitalist states covering the earth’s surface, with gaps and “holes” only on the margins. The military philosophy has been to apply intense heat to weld shut any seams coming apart.

It is brutal. It is conservative. It is arrogant. It is cynical. But to be anti-USA is not necessarily a certificate of positive virtue. The USA’s adversary may well be a “sub-imperialist” or “paleo-imperialist” power, one whose drive is for a more localised and primitive form of imperialism rather than for national or human liberation.

Capital now has many substantial centres. Some states, far from superpowers, are nevertheless dominant centres for a particular region — India, Brazil, Mexico, Nigeria for example. This regional hegemonism has been called “sub-imperialism”. By “paleo-imperialism” I mean attempts by smaller powers to offset their weak position on the larger canvass of the world economy by small-scale regional conquests — Iraq in Kuwait, Serbia in Kosova, Argentina (1982) in the Falklands... The prefix “paleo” signifies an earlier or previous form of something; thus “paleolithic” pertains to the earlier Stone Age, and “neolithic” to the later Stone Age. Such conquests may be condoned or endorsed by the big powers: Indonesia in East Timor, Turkey in Cyprus, Morocco in the Western Sahara, Serbia in Kosova until 1999. Or they may bring the smaller power into conflict with bigger powers.

But paleo-imperialism does not cease to be reactionary when it comes into conflict with a bigger power, any more than a small capitalist exploiter is converted into a philanthropist by a competitive tussle with a big corporation.

The US is the world’s biggest military power by a long way. When it wages wars, it reckons to profit in prestige and influence. Victories in those wars feed the arrogance of US power. But the world is not a US empire. Why ever should the European Union and Japan support the USA in its wars of 1991, 1999, and 2001 if those wars were fundamentally, essentially, centrally about making the world the USA’s as against theirs?

There is a network of cartels between the big-power governments (G8, WTO, IMF, etc.) which has served, more or less, to regulate the “imperialism of free trade”, and the USA has the loudest voice in those cartels. But repeated conflicts within them — for example, the recent conflict over steel tariffs between the USA and the EU — show that these cartels do not form a single compact centre, and that they are not solely US-run.

The facts contradict the idea that the EU and Japan are just “semi-colonies” of the USA (an idea which would have Marxists in Britain, France or Australia campaigning for “national liberation” from the USA). They also do not fit with the notion that there is really just one single global big-capitalist class of which the US state is the main “executive committee” while the EU and Japanese states are only sub-committees.

If there were a global big-capitalist class, a big chunk of it would consist of capitals firmly based in Japan and the EU, and a significant chunk of capitals rooted in former colonies or semi-colonies. Of the 500 top public companies in

the world, 205 are headquartered in the USA, but 148 in Europe, 92 in Japan, and some 28 in poorer countries (South Korea, Brazil, India, China, Mexico, etc)<sup>2</sup>.

And the USA has a huge mountain of debt to foreign capitalists, \$2.2 trillion in early 2002 and growing rapidly. It cannot carry on this way for ever. According to one estimate by Goldman Sachs, at the present rate, by 2006 the USA will be borrowing new money abroad just to pay the interest on the debt it will already have. The debt will “run away”, unsustainably.

The “empire” that US “globo-cop” action enforces is that of big capital, not of the USA. Big capital is not a state, and it is not identical with the USA. We do not support smaller capital against big capital in the way that we support the rights of smaller nations against big powers.

We do not support bigger capital either! Even if we can surmise that a particular US “globocop” action may — if all goes well, if there are no hidden hitches — bring some improvement on balance, we give no credit in advance to big-capitalist power. We seek to educate and mobilise the working class as an independent — which necessarily means, oppositional — force. Our basic stance is one enounced by Trotsky: “We are not a government party; we are the party of irreconcilable opposition... Our tasks... we realise not through the medium of bourgeois governments... but exclusively through the education of the masses through agitation, through explaining to the workers what they should defend and what they should overthrow.”

### Imperialism old and new

**W**HY NOT just call the current world structure “global capitalism”? Why talk about the *imperialism* of free trade? It *is* global capitalism. To call it global capitalism is to convey or imply most of the essentials about it. And it is certainly misleading to suggest that the world today is structured in the same way as the species of “imperialism” that Lenin wrote about in his famous pamphlet of 1916. However, it is equally misleading to say that the world is no longer imperialist in a more general sense.

From about the 1880s, the big capitalist powers’ acquisition of colonial possessions — which had been going on, one way or another, for centuries — moved into a new gear. There was a concerted rush to divide up almost the whole world between the big empires.

In that rush many territories were seized primarily for political-strategic reasons, but overall there was an increase in the export of capital to the colonies, systematically developing infrastructure and raw-materials industries there to supply factories in the metropolis, and opening up wider markets there. (Before, imperial powers had often been content to limit themselves to plunder and only marginal trade in their colonies).

In England, especially, the advocates and enthusiasts of that drive to carve up and exploit the world called it “imperialism”. At first Marxists used different terms, like “world policy”, but in time “imperialism” became common usage.

The Marxist writers, from Karl Kautsky when still a revolutionary through Rosa Luxemburg, Rudolf Hilferding, Nikolai Bukharin and Vladimir Lenin, argued that the “imperialist” drive was linked to underlying economic trends towards “monopoly capital” and “finance capital”.

Capitalist industries were becoming dominated by a few huge corporations in each country, which bolstered their position by securing protective tariffs and made price-fixing and market-fixing deals among themselves, rather than by lots of small competing enterprises. Increasingly, high finance was central in each national complex of capital, but also ranged wider and wider internationally. The high finance and industrial cartels of the different richer countries

drove out internationally in search of opportunities for investment, of markets for manufactured goods, and of sources of raw materials. Vast new areas were opened up to capitalism, or at least the beginnings of capitalism. Earlier in the 19th century, the industrial and empire-establishing pioneer, Britain, had been able to range wide through free trade, but it was now seeing its industry fast outstripped by Germany and the USA. France, Japan, the Netherlands, even Italy, Belgium and Russia, were anxious not to be shut out of the feast. The division and redivision of the world could not but develop through the building and jostling of rival empires.

The Marxists' answer to those economic trends was not to be simplistically "anti-monopoly" or "anti-finance", but to argue that the working class must drive forward, through the new phase of capitalism, developing the contradictions within that phase, towards socialism. Today, too, working-class anti-imperialism means combining consistent democracy (the right of nations to self-determination) and a struggle for workers' control and workers' power.

The Marxists differed on details, but all argued that the economic trends underpinned the "imperialist" drive, the growth of militarism in the same period, and thus the course towards World War One.

After World War One, the modes and patterns of 1880s-1914 "high" imperialism continued. In some respects they were intensified. The world became more sharply divided into trade blocs — empires or spheres of influence. The pattern reached paroxysm in World War Two. Germany, stripped of its colonies and some of its territory, and subjected to crippling reparations after World War One, drove for revenge against the old, fat empires and spheres of influence. For a while it transformed almost all of continental Europe into an empire ruled from Berlin.

That paroxysm brought the self-destruction of the old patterns. From World War Two the USA emerged hyper-powerful; the USSR, a second superpower, although a more brittle one, which needed tight political control in order to keep its sphere of domination; the big old colonial powers, Britain, France, the Netherlands, Japan, exhausted and indebted; and the peoples of the colonies, aroused and more confident.

The world was divided into two camps, one led by the USA, one led by the USSR. Within the camp led by the USA, the great empires of "high" imperialism — British, French, Dutch and Japanese — were broken down by colonial liberation struggles or by calculated retreat. The USA, cautiously but definitely, supported that process. It did not want the USSR to be able to stand as the champion of freedom for the colonies of the big old empires; and a world of free trade was the best and most robust terrain for its big corporations to flourish. In Western Europe, the USA encouraged a process in which the different nation-states gradually linked together into a "Common Market" (1957), a "single market" (1987), a single currency (2002), and, by now, in the European Union, the distinct beginnings of a federal European super-state.

The achievement of independence by the former colonies was followed — very unevenly, but in some countries very spectacularly — by the rise of autonomous capitalist industry there, especially from the 1960s.

The other camp was dominated by what Leon Trotsky called the USSR autocracy's drive "to expand its power, its prestige, its revenues" through extended political domination, in other words, Russian Stalinist imperialism. Some of the states within it nevertheless saw fast development of industry and an industrial working class. From the 1970s, some of them increased their links with the world market. The acids which thus spread through the Stalinist sphere combined with the settling-down of autocratic rule into a system of corrupt and gridlocked inertia, the rise of a qualified middle class, and working-class and national revolt, to prepare the conditions for the collapse back into bourgeois world-market capi-

talism, in 1989-91, of the whole apparently-ironclad hulk.

The USA and the international institutions it led proved strong enough to integrate Russia and China as subordinate partners into those institutions, and to extend worldwide the structures of domination-by-the-strongest-through-policing-freeish-trade already established in the western bloc.

### Two conclusions

**T**O TRY to put the word “imperialism” back into the box of signifying only the particular phase of “high imperialism” (late 19th century, first part of the 20th century) is futile, since the process of its meaning being broadened has already taken place, many decades ago. Some would-be Marxists who prided themselves on their devotion to old texts may have thought that by calling the USA “imperialist” in the 1960s they were asserting that the world was in all essentials the same as in 1916, but that was their private illusion, not shared by the majority of those many who used the word “imperialist”.

The always-greedy domination of the world by big capital is also, and inseparably, the always-greedy domination of the world by particular centres, cities, states — hence imperialist in the broad sense. As capital develops, it outgrows the nation-states, greedily takes the whole world as its arena, and at the same time becomes more closely tied up with and reliant on those states. Capitalist development is uneven: more-developed areas attract more new investment by virtue of their greater markets, better infrastructure, more qualified workforces, and centralisation of revenues. Capitalist “free trade” is not the impersonal, automatic process of orthodox economic textbooks. To repeat a point made earlier, at every stage of market haggling economic, political, diplomatic and military might skews the scales.

That does not mean that the independence of the colonies has changed things only formally — that the flags have changed, but that the essential relations are the same. The colonial liberation struggles were not wasted effort. India’s policy is no longer dictated from London, or Algeria’s from Paris. Economic independence is impossible in an interconnected capitalist world, but political independence is possible, and worthwhile.

Moreover, political independence had economic consequences. Some former colonies now have their own multinational corporations, international banks and economic spheres of influence, not to mention universities, airlines, stock exchanges. Their exports are mainly manufactured goods, not, as they used to be, bulk raw materials. They have vast tracts of poverty and misery — but those are the product of capitalist development, not of stasis.

Two main political conclusions follow. One, that the working class should push *forward through* capitalist globalisation — basing itself on the class contradictions *within* the process, fighting the class struggle within the process, aiming towards its own socialist and democratic “globalisation” — rather than trying to back out of globalisation, halt it, or maintain national or local barriers. Two, that in the conflicts between US hyper-imperialism and local “subimperialisms” or “paleo-imperialisms”, we take an independent working-class stance — we place ourselves in the “Third Camp”.

### “Empire”

**N**EGRI-HARDT’S identification of the current world order as “Empire” — in contrast to the older “imperialism” — has much in common with those conclusions. What is different?

To summarise *Empire* is difficult; the authors themselves do not claim that it

builds up an argument by tight reasoning, but say airily that it “can be read... front to back, back to front, in pieces, in a hopscotch pattern...”

It starts by promising to depict a new “political subject” or “sovereign power” which is “materialising before our very eyes”. This “Empire” is “altogether different” from the old structure of rival colonial empires which dominated the world in the late 19th century and up to the later 20th century.

We have to push forward through Empire, rather than seek to retain or revert to old forms of domination; it offers “new possibilities to the forces of liberation”. Those forces are not those of the industrial working class, but rather of “the multitude”.

This “Empire” is not a US empire. Empire has no emperor. There is “no territorial centre of power”: This is a “smooth world”.

The authors refer to the UN, the IMF, the World Bank and GATT; “the huge transnational corporations”; the “central position” of “communications industries”; and the wars, primarily by the USA, against the “enemies of Empire”. However, Empire — it seems — is something more than any of these; it is a world-encompassing structure of life and civilisation, something like the ideal of the Roman Empire, but with no Rome.

Its evolution also signifies capital being pushed forward by working people’s struggles. An “uncontainable desire for freedom broke and buried the nation-state and determined the transition toward Empire”.

There are “alternatives within Empire”. Negri and Hardt list what they consider “the most radical and powerful struggles” up to 1996: the first intifada in the West Bank and Gaza (from 1987), the Chinese democracy movement of 1989, the May 1992 riots in Los Angeles, the Zapatista uprising (beginning 1994), and the mass strike waves in France (1995) and South Korea (1996).

They claim that these struggles “failed to communicate” or find a “common language”; but, regardless of that, each struggle “leaps vertically, directly to the virtual centre of Empire... touches immediately on the highest levels of imperial power”.

Negri and Hardt then discuss modernity and post-modernity. Modernity, they say, originated in a revolutionary humanist impulse; but the Enlightenment and the ideas of “nation” and “people” put a lid on it. They themselves hold to the idea of “the multitude”, taken from the 17th-century philosopher Spinoza — a democrat, influenced by the struggles of the world’s first bourgeois revolution in the Dutch Republic, and one who was considered virtually an atheist because he equated “God” with “nature” — and argue that the politics of “the nation” and “the people” construct a “general will” above and against the diverse desires of the multitude.

They concede the “progressive nature of subaltern nationalism”, but stress the inbuilt narrow limits of the “liberation” involved in ex-colonial national liberation. Empire is a movement from modernity to post-modernity; but that means that “the structures and logics of power in the contemporary world are entirely immune to the ‘liberatory’ weapons of the postmodernist politics of difference”.

According to Negri and Hardt, the US Constitution escaped the limitations of the French Revolution’s politics; it instituted “a democratic interaction of powers linked together in networks”. That explains the USA’s ability to take a “privileged position” in the construction of Empire, “a global project of network power”.

As well as being the US constitution extended worldwide, Empire also — according to Negri and Hardt — arises from the New Deal being extended worldwide. The Russian revolution of 1917 and the great slump after 1929 made it necessary to transform the old capitalist order of colonial imperialism. But this was done effectively only in the USA. “With the New Deal the real process of

surpassing imperialism began to take root.”

After 1945 the New Deal was extended worldwide. Then the Vietnam war became the “symbolic centre of a whole series of struggles against one common enemy: the international disciplinary order... [they] forced capital to undergo a paradigm shift”.

Capital had to develop a new form in order to accomplish a “negative mirroring and inversion of the new quality of labour power”. Industrial factory labour has declined. “Providing services and manipulating information are [now] at the heart of economic production.” The dominant form of labour is “immaterial labour” which “immediately involves social interaction and cooperation”.

Civil society is “withering”; such institutions as the family, the school, the hospital and the factory are breaking down; but everything is integrated into a “global society of control”.

Within all-pervading “global society of control” there is, however, an equally all-pervading “counter-Empire”. With the growth of “immaterial labour”, “language and cooperation” have become the dominant productive force. It becomes impossible to mark off production from the rest of social life, or limit the working class to wage-workers in factories and offices.

Whereas in another era, the proletariat was correctly equated with the industrial working class, today it must be identified with all who come under “capitalist norms of production and reproduction”. It is the same as “the multitude” or “the poor”.

This “multitude” will “push through” Empire. Negri and Hardt propose three political demands. All should have the full rights of citizenship in the country where they live and work; there should be a social wage and a guaranteed income for all; and there should be “free access to and control over knowledge, information, communication and affects”.

Negri and Hardt believe that “the institutional workers’ organisations have begun to lose their power. A new type of resistance has to be invented”. It will not be political revolution. “The decline of any autonomous political sphere signals the decline of any independent space where revolution could emerge in the national political regime, or where social space could be transformed using the instruments of the state.”

But there is a “radical counterpower” in the “actual activity of the multitude” — primarily “desertion, exodus... nomadism... subtraction and defection”. Negri and Hardt conclude by citing St Francis of Assisi — “posing against the misery of power the joy of being” — as a figure “that might serve to illuminate the future life of communist militancy”.

### “For I am a philosopher...”

*“M Proudhon... does not feel it necessary to speak of the 17th, 18th or 19th century, for his history proceeds in the misty realm of imagination and rises far above space and time... not profane history — a history of man — but sacred history — a history of ideas.”*

(Marx to Annenkov, 28 December 1846)

**L**IKEWISE NEGRI and Hardt do not feel it necessary to speak of any particular countries (besides the USA), industries, or corporations. Theirs is “sacred” sociology. Having argued that the early USA was “an Empire that is also a democratic republic”, they concede that in the 20th century, “the US, far from being that singular and democratic nation its founders imagined it to be, an Empire of Liberty, was the author of direct and brutal imperialist projects...” No matter. After 1968, the USA faced great “pressure for a return to republican principles and the original constitutional spirit”. The “original consti-

tutional spirit” lives on, despite the Contra war and all the rest, and animates Empire. So also, in an even mistier fashion, do the ideas of Polybius about the Roman Empire.

This is a book of a thousand “what? oh!”s. Every page presents us with passages obscure, so far-fetched that we cannot believe they are meant literally, or flatly contradicting what is written on other pages. And the “oh” which allows us to continue is not the gasp with which we greet a startling insight, but the sigh with which we puzzle out something which seems a plausible approximation to what the authors must, in the context, mean.

A long analysis of Negri’s and Hardt’s welter of quotations is beyond me. For sure, however, many of the references are garbled. A section discussing Luxemburg and Lenin on imperialism gets the gist of their arguments almost completely wrong. The footnotes read as if they were added by one writer (Hardt?) to a main text drafted by another (Negri?) on the basis of guesswork about what references might be relevant, or look impressive, for each page.

One random example. The authors claim that “the Soviet Union was better understood not as a totalitarian society but rather as a bureaucratic dictatorship”, and refer us to a footnote. Citing one of the academic studies in the 1970s which also made that claim? No: citing Trotsky (*Revolution Betrayed*) and Cornelius Castoriadis, writers who called the USSR totalitarian.

The book’s status as a best-seller and something of a “cult” text must owe much to the facility it gives us to read what we want into it, and then to find what we have read into it tricked out with a dazzling range of allusions.

And the book’s breath is heavy with the liquor of inebriated optimism. “The practice of Empire is continually bathed in blood”, but a bright future shines through the wounds. “When the action of Empire is effective, this is due not to its own force but to the fact that it is driven by the rebound from the resistance of the multitude against colonial power”, and now “the attempts at repressing the multitude are really paradoxical, inverted manifestations of its strength”. It recalls theological arguments about evil. Evil, to the theologian, is merely the peculiar passing expression of the working-through of the will of God, which is ultimately and infinitely benign. And so, for Hardt and Negri, Empire is merely the peculiar passing expression of the working-through of the strivings of the multitude, which are ultimately and infinitely liberating and communistic.

Negri became prominent on the Italian left in the late 1960s and the 1970s, a period of huge and promising working-class struggles. That “cycle of struggles... would end badly: retrenchment, addiction, imprisonment, even suicide were not uncommon...” (as Steve Wright puts in a new book, *Storming Heaven*, p.198). Negri himself was jailed. Instead of facing sad truths and learning lessons, he takes refuge in a theologico-philosophical “optimism”. The “multitude” is still the most beautiful thing in the world.

*“I still hold my original views”, replied Pangloss, ‘for I am a philosopher... The pre-established harmony, together with the plenum and the materia subtilis, is the most beautiful thing in the world.’*

Voltaire, *Candide*

### The “system of command”

**N**EGRI AND Hardt open their book, as we have seen, by promising to reveal “a new structure of rule”. In places they seem close to being specific about it. They refer to “a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule” (p.xi). They go on to state that “only an established power... relatively autonomous from the sovereign nation-states, is capable of functioning as the centre of the new world order” (p.14). They list a

series of “tiers” of Empire (p.309ff): the US military (“the pinnacle of Empire” — p.345), the G7, the transnational corporations and the nation-states. By their account, the NGOs (non-governmental organisations: charities, aid organisations, and so on) are another “tier”, which provides “moral intervention” as “a frontline force of imperial intervention”.

They repeatedly insist, however, that “the coming Empire is not American and the United States is not its centre”. And they immediately contradict the image of “tiers” below a “pinnacle” by declaring that “today’s imperial constitution” has “the form of a rhizomatic and universal communication network in which relations are established to and from all its points and nodes” (p.319: a rhizome is an underground stem of a plant, bearing both roots and above-ground shoots).

Their main emphasis is on the idea of Empire having no Rome (p.317) and “no territorial centre of power” (p.xi), being a “smooth space [with] no place of power — it is both everywhere and nowhere” (p.190).

They are emphatic that the “jurisdiction and authority of nation-states” has dwindled, “effectively surpassed” by the “large transnational corporations” (p.306). Bombs and armies still exist. But “the history of imperialist, inter-imperialist and anti-imperialist wars is over... Every imperial war is a police action” (p.189), defined and shaped by a new all-pervading “international justice” and “global right” (p.180-1).

However, in their view it is “not accurate” to say that “a supranational quasi-state is being formed” (p.39); in looking for the “imperial machine”, there is “no need to... focus on the established supranational regulatory institutions” (p.31).

Is it that the big transnational corporations have somehow managed to establish a “logic of rule” without a state, through the market (“both everywhere and nowhere”)? Some passages suggest that. “The huge transnational corporations construct the fundamental fabric of the biopolitical world” (p.31); thus, “the transformation of the democratic state such that its functions have been integrated into mechanisms of command on the global level of the transnational corporations” (p.308). “The world market might serve as the diagram of imperial power” (p.190).

That would raise two questions. Have the transnational corporations really cut free from nation-states? Negri and Hardt assume, without argument, that they have. And, can capital rule just through the market, without a state?

Negri and Hardt disavow the idea that the “world order” can be “a harmonious concert orchestrated by the... hidden hand of the world market” (p.3). But the hand of power is certainly hidden in their account.

Is the orchestration of global order the work of a diffuse “network” of institutions, rather than a tightly-structured state power? They claim that “the capitalist project [is] to bring together economic power and political power” (p.9); that “economic production and political constitution tend increasingly to coincide” (p.41), or that “the state and capital effectively coincide” (p.236). Coincide where? In a “society of control” (p.24)? Are they arguing that the networks of civil society, rather than state machinery, establish order?

On the contrary. “Civil society is absorbed in the state”, they say (p.24, and, again, p.243).

States dissolve into a global “society of control”; that society is “absorbed in the state”; the state coincides with capital; and meanwhile “the production of capital converges ever more with the production and reproduction of social life itself” (p.402).

In other words, state, society, capital and life all dissolve into each other; all are both everywhere and nowhere. Negri and Hardt call this “the real subsumption of global society under capital” (p.332).

The book’s nearest approach to a definite base-point in this swirl of everything

dissolving into everything else is that “communication has become the central element” (p.347); “communication is the form of capitalist production in which capital has succeeded in submitting society entirely and globally to its regime” (p.347); “communications industries have assumed... a central position” (p.33); “the glue that holds together the diverse functions and bodies of the hybrid constitution [of Empire] is... the spectacle, an integrated and diffuse apparatus of images and ideas that produces and regulates public discourse and opinion” (p.321). The world is ruled by AOL-Time Warner?

In any case, this is a diffuse but totalitarian new order. Negri and Hardt think “totalitarian” too abrupt a description for the Stalinist USSR. They have no qualms about applying the same term to bourgeois democracy today. “In imperial postmodernity big government has become merely the despotic means of domination and the totalitarian production of subjectivity” (p.349).

The picture of everything dissolving into a “smooth space” of “cold placidness” (p.64) makes it hard to grasp the *specifics* of resistance, despite all Negri-Hardt’s *general* gush about the multitude resisting continuously and everywhere. Analytically, it obscures the actual functioning of states in the world of today.

They blithely claim that the concept of the Third World is out of date because today we have the Third World (pauperisation, presumably) in the First and the First World (luxury, advanced technology) in the Third. Maybe there are several different “Third Worlds”, rather than a single homogeneous one, but the world is still not such a “smooth space” as Hardt and Negri make out, far from it. For a start, countries with large, pauperised landless peasant populations are different from those without.

As Ellen Wood writes (*Monthly Review*, July 1999): “Today, capitalism is all but universal. Capitalist laws of motion, the logic of capitalism, has penetrated ever deeper into the societies of advanced capitalism and spatially throughout the world...”

“But to say that capitalism is universal is not to say that all, or even most, capital is transnational... We still have national economies, national states, nationally based capital, even nationally based transnationals. It hardly needs to be added that international agencies of capital, like the IMF or the World Bank, are above all agents of specific national capitals, and derive whatever powers of enforcement they have from nation-states — both the imperial states that command them and the subordinate states that carry out their orders...”

“If anything, the universalisation of capitalism has also meant, or at least been accompanied by, the universalisation of the nation-state. Global capitalism is more than ever a global system of national states, and the universalisation of capitalism is presided over by nation-states, especially one hegemonic super-power.”

Armies and police have expanded, state provision or regulation of infrastructure has increased, state bureaucracies have become stronger and more effective. Globalisation actually requires a *stronger* system of nation-states — with more political independence, with more clout and social base to enable them to reshape their economies for world-market goals — than the less globally-integrated capitalism of former times.

Capital is, as ever, closely intertwined with states. But the relative mutual independence of particular capitalist corporations and particular states has, if anything, increased since the 1980s, with privatisation and the development of a few, if only a few, corporations which are genuinely transnational (rather than nationally-based with operations abroad).

With the collapse of Stalinism, the average level of autonomy of society from the state has increased, not decreased. With the multiplication of media (Internet; massive pirating of music, videos, software, and so on; wide availability of cas-

settes and cheap cassette players in poorer countries), the possibility of the big communications corporations organising a “totalitarian production of subjectivity” is reduced.

### The multitude and its refusals

**I**N GENERAL Negri-Hardt are dismissive of actual workers' organisations and struggles, preferring to talk about a “multitude” which mobilises in a much more nebulous and mysterious way.

In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx, beginning to outline for the first time the processes by which the working class became an organised, conscious, creative force capable of remaking society, wrote: “*When it is a question of making a precise study of strikes, combinations and other forms in which the proletarians carry out before our eyes their organisation as a class, some [socialists] are seized with real fear and others display a transcendental disdain.*”

In *Empire*, we find a regression from that materialist conception of class politics to the idealist and speculative conceptions that still clung to Marx as he first moved towards the idea of the proletariat as a revolutionary class.

“*Where, then, is the positive possibility of... emancipation? Answer: In the formation of a class with radical chains, a class in civil society that is not of civil society, a class that is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere of society having a universal character because of its universal suffering... a sphere, in short, that is the complete loss of humanity and can only redeem itself through total redemption of humanity. This dissolution of society as a particular class is the proletariat.*”

(Karl Marx *Towards the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*)

Negri and Hardt hail “refusal” as something endemic inside Empire, and indeed as its main driving force, constantly impelling capital to try to find new ways to overcome it. Yet their positive descriptions are actually all of the dynamics of Empire rather than of the multitude. The multitude actually appears in their thought only as a philosophical inversion of Empire, a factor of disorder deduced from their picture of the order of Empire, without any positive and deliberate content of its own. For them “the poor” is the revolutionary agent, and “the poor is god on Earth”, because of its “*destitution and suffering*” (p.157).

But worse. In Negri-Hardt's picture state, society, capital and life are dissolving into each other. The dissolution of the dissolution is everywhere yet nowhere, permanent yet organically integrated into the reconstitution of capitalist order.

There is no “outside” to Empire, and therefore no possibility of resisting it from “outside”. The “inside” of Empire has life, production, society, capital, state, communication, all merged into a single blur? Where, amidst “the totalitarian production of subjectivity” and the all-embracing “global society of control”, can there be effective resistance?

In “refusal” — “desertion, exodus and nomadism... subtraction and defection” (p.212).

There is a contradiction. Negri-Hardt first assert that it is impossible to find a place “outside” of Empire from which to resist it, and then argue for going outside (“exodus”) as the only form of resistance. They see great subversive qualities in “nomadism and miscegenation” as forms of “refusal” — but also recognise, in other passages in the book, that the movements of migrant labour and refugees are usually driven attempts to evade capital's depredations, rather than positive acts of subversion driving development, often expedients of poverty and misery rather than subversion. Others influenced by Negri have seen subversion in such unlikely expedients as self-employment.

More radical refusal? Real refusal? Somewhat desperately, Negri-Hardt write:

“The will to be against really needs a body that is completely incapable of submitting to command. It needs a body that is incapable of submitting to family life, to factory discipline, to the regulations of a traditional sex life, and so on” (p.216).

This “new body must also be able to create a new life” (p.216). But how? The argument culminates either in extolling pathological-saintly withdrawal, or in giving a romantic aura to anything which can be loosely described as “refusal” Negri-Hardt adopt a vision in which the range of activities that can be perceived as effective revolutionary subversion excludes the vital axes of *democracy*, *organisation*, and systematic struggle.

### The working class

**N**EGRI-HARDT mention the mass strike waves in France (1995) and South Korea (1996), but register no audible signal from them. They “failed to communicate”. They leapt “directly to the virtual centre of Empire” but were there, presumably, swallowed in the maw of Empire’s permanent crisis-and-reconstitution. Negri-Hardt say that a “new type of resistance” must be found in place of the “institutional workers’ organisations”. They write of “the decline... of the effectiveness and role of labour unions” (p.328) as of something inescapable. And unworrying, too: they opine that the US proletariat is “strong” because of, not despite, its “low party and union representation” (p.289).

It is not so much that Negri and Hardt deny or ignore the working class, as that they *dissolve* it. Just as state, society and capital all dissolve into each other in Negri-Hardt’s picture, so also the working class dissolves in society, and production dissolves into life.

They argue that production today is shaped by the “domination of the informational production of services” (p.288); that “immaterial labour (involved in communication, cooperation, and the production and reproduction of affects) occupies an increasingly central position” (p.53). Strikes are scarcely possible without developing a “completely incapable” body (as above), since now “there are no time clocks to punch on the terrain of biopolitical production; the proletariat produces in all its generality everywhere all day long” (p.403). “Exploitation can no longer be quantified and localised” (p.209); now it is redefined as “the expropriation of cooperation and the nullification of the meanings of linguistic production” (p.385). But “immaterial labour” has subversive possibilities because it “immediately involves social interaction and cooperation... seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism” (p.294).

It is as if the whole, or almost the whole, of the global workforce were made up of computer programmers — working flexibly; unable to draw a clear line between the life-time when they develop ideas and the work-time when they contribute them; communicating with each other over the Internet, at least potentially, in the way typified by the development of “open source” software. (This is software — the best-known example being the Linux operating system — developed cooperatively over the Internet, usually by people using spare time from other jobs, and made available free for use or for suggestions for improvement.)

The “industrial working class” — although it “has not disappeared or even declined in numbers” (p.256) — has nevertheless “all but disappeared from view” (p.53). Whose view? The industrial working class, without disappearing in fact, “or even declining in numbers”, has “disappeared” from *Negri-Hardt’s* view, sunk below the smooth waters of the all-engulfing “society of control” which leaves only the flotsam and jetsam of refusal, desertion and exodus as counterforce.

A first answer to their account of production is that the world has many more cleaners, truck-drivers, or assembly-line workers than it has computer programmers. But are Negri and Hardt just exaggerating a real trend?

No. The problem is more than that. Labour today is not a “smooth space”. The labour most globalised — integrated into globally-organised production processes, mobile on the globe’s surface — is labour producing material things, such as clothes, computers, TVs, cars. The “immaterial” is labour whose product is not a material thing detachable from the labour process itself, and which therefore is tied to the place of consumption. Labour in education, health care, cleaning, postal deliveries, or bus-driving is localised.

The more aristocratic forms of “immaterial” labour are often localised too. Saskia Sassen’s study of *The Global City* shows how the more aristocratic ancillary functions of the big global corporations cluster in “highly concentrated command points in the organisation of the world economy... a new type of city... the global city... New York, London, Los Angeles, Tokyo... The more globalised the economy becomes, the higher the agglomeration of central functions in a relatively few sites, that is, the global cities”.

There are exceptions, such as mail-sorting done at a distance over video links. But on the whole the trends are for an increase in both globalised material labour and localised immaterial labour.

Capital today creates a workforce simultaneously more universalised (wage-labour spreads ever wider); more mobile, versatile, educated, and able to communicate; and more differentiated and variegated (particular industries “cluster” in particular parts of the world; in Britain at least, a “labour aristocracy” has re-emerged).

From their speculations about “immaterial labour”, Negri and Hardt deduce that Empire is a “world finally outside measure” (p.355). But the measure, under capitalism, is money. And the world is not “outside” money. On the contrary: money, the market, buying and selling, invade ever-larger areas. Linux itself is now pretty thoroughly integrated into commercial circuits. Money may measure more and more aberrantly; but its measure encloses more and more of life.

In a passage which destroys the whole drift of their argument, Negri and Hardt recognise that the wage-working class generates “new forces and passions” for the creation of a communist society in a way that the general “multitude” never can. Writing about industrialisation in the ex-colonial world, they say: “Entry into the wage system can be bloody (and it has been); it can reproduce systems of ferocious repression (and it has done so); but even in the shacks of the new shantytowns and favelas, the wage relation does determine the constitution of new needs, desires and demands... The peasants who became wage workers... become infused with a new desire for liberation” (p.252).

### The “workerist schema”

**B**OTH THE strengths and the weaknesses of Negri’s and Hardt’s approach make more sense when seen in the context of the history described in Steve Wright’s recent book, *Storming Heaven: class composition and struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*.

Negri entered politics as a Catholic leftist, but from the early 1960s became associated with a new current in Italian left thinking which called itself “workerist”. It was far from the anarchistic tone of Negri’s politics today.

Its leading figure, Raniero Panzieri, had been the editor of the theoretical magazine of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI). Pushed out of that post as the PSI leadership moved the party from being a self-proclaimedly “revolutionary Marxist” (in fact, Stalinistic) movement to joining the Christian Democrats in government

coalition, he was still in the PSI, and oriented to the mass labour movement. So were his collaborators on a new magazine, *Quaderni Rossi*, launched in 1960. Negri himself was in the PSI; others, notably Mario Tronti, were in the Italian Communist Party (PCI).

They were, however, dissatisfied with the immobility and stagnation of the labour movement. As Paul Ginsborg describes it in his *History of Contemporary Italy* (p.88): “Under Communist leadership political action was split into three distinct spheres: the immediate day-to-day battles waged by the workers against cold, hunger and penury; the struggle for progressive democracy waged by the Party in parliament; and the revolution itself, an impossibility until Stalin moved”. The economic struggle was very limited after the unions’ defeats in the late 1940s and early 50s. The parliamentary struggle even more so, since the PCI would be a reviled opposition party for the foreseeable future. And the future revolution? In the 1940s, workers stuck pictures of Stalin on their machines and their factory walls — and waited. By the 1960s they no longer expected, and mostly no longer even wanted, Stalinist tanks — but what was the alternative?

The workerists took in a lot of influences in their search for a fresh approach: maverick ex-Trotskyists like CLR James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Cornelius Castoriadis; American students of the sociology of factory work. They studied Lenin’s *Development of Capitalism in Russia*, and chapter 15 of *Capital*, volume 1, where Marx expounds the revolutionary implications of large-scale mechanised industry for the composition of the working class.

The PCI and PSI proposed “development” and “planning”, against the supposed inability of the corrupt Christian-Democrat regime to achieve those things. The workerists dissented. Propose “development”, as against capitalism? No, wrote Panzieri, “one could say that the two terms capitalism and development are the same thing”. For them development “means neither a generic ‘progress’ nor ‘modernisation’ but... the extended reproduction of... the capital relation and the class contradictions which followed in its train”.

The job of Marxists, then, was, by continuous and attentive scrutiny, to discern those “class contradictions”. Instead of seeing the working class as a sluggish mass reacting in stereotype ways, they must be attentive to the innovative, creative struggles of workers.

“We have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first, and workers second. This is a mistake... We have to start again from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class” (Mario Tronti).

The workerists’ attention was drawn especially to the big new factories in northern Italy, full of young men, migrants from the South, who faced the factory discipline with the fresh anger of a new industrial generation and with whom the union activists, mostly formed in the 1940s, had trouble communicating. Here was “a new working class with needs and behaviour no longer commensurate with those of either the labour movement or capital”.

Years later, the spirit of the workerists would be summed up by Francesco Cialfoni: “*To know more about the workers of Turin, to know more in general about the oppressed classes, is not a small problem. It is the cultural and political problem of any left worthy of the name*”. And by Negri himself: “*The fact that we cannot spell [the alternative] out does not mean that it does not exist. It exists as a murmuring among the proletariat*”.

How far the workerists really got to “know more about the workers of Turin”, Steve Wright doubts. “The workerists’ talk of the compactness of the class merely stood as an admission that its inner workings remained opaque to them.. However, they tried.

From the emphasis on understanding the contradictions within capitalist development, rather than counterposing “development” against “capitalism”, a

line is visible to Negri's current argument about "pushing through Empire" rather than trying to back out of it, and his opposition to "Third Worldism". (Even back in the 1960s, according to Wright, "classic operaismo [workerism] rejected the Third Worldism then widespread among the Western New Left").

Picking up on Marx's idea in *Capital* chapter 15 about workers' strikes driving the development of machinery, the workerists emphasised workers' struggle as the force pushing capitalist innovations and reorganisations. From that a line is visible to the idea that "the multitude produces Empire". Within a similar form, however, the content has been inverted. The book *Empire* shows no signs of any attentive listening to the "murmuring among the proletariat"; it reads more as if the authors, sitting back in a blissful daze, have arbitrarily picked this or that phrase from the babble of the whole "multitude" around them, and mainly from the elements of that "multitude" closer to their academic perches. (The dustjacket to *Empire* describes Negri as a prison inmate, in Rome, but in fact he was a professor in Paris while writing the book. Only later did he go back to Italy to negotiate about the rest of the prison sentence which he left outstanding when he fled from Italy to France in 1983.)

The book describes no struggles in any detail. Its claim that Empire was produced and shaped by the struggles of the multitude is simple assertion — with a theological tinge, as we have seen — and sometimes reduces itself to the tautologous proposition that every structure of human society, however inhuman, is the product of human activity.

The catchword of "refusal" originates in the "workerism" of the 1960s. Then, however, it meant "refusal of work". It meant placing emphasis on demands for shorter hours and slower work speeds, and flat-rate wage rises, in contrast to the PCI's emphasis on high productivity to win better wages. It did not mean blanket social "refusal" or the development of "completely incapable" bodies. As late as 1968 the workerist journal *La Classe* was extravagantly dismissive of those "who, instead of making a correct class analysis, identify the 'left of the people' in those most discontented, ultimately organising only poor devils, the sexually repressed, adolescents with Oedipus complexes, students in conflict with the family, lunatics, wretches, filmmakers in crisis, anguished noblewomen, sex maniacs, bourgeois anxious for expiation, the phobia-ridden, etc..."

Likewise the idea of the state, society, production and life all merging originates in the "workerism" of the 1960s. Tronti developed the idea of the "social factory". But by that he meant not the factory was dissolved into the general flow of life, but that capital shaped and moulded the rest of society to the needs of the factory — as indeed it did in Turin. The workerists were fiercely "factoryist".

The one-sidedness of that fierce "factoryism" undid them. In a recent interview (*Le Monde*, 27 January 2002), Negri stated — as something self-evident — that the "traditional" schema of phases of class struggle was "first, trade-union and worker resistance; then the insurrectional phase; finally, the constituent phase" [constituting the new social order].

The influence of the PCI's three-spheres thinking was evident. But where was *politics* in Negri's scheme? Workerist journals like *Classe Operaia* (a successor, 1963-67, to *Quaderni Rossi*) criticised the PCI leadership on the ground that it had "refused to work to consolidate the party as an autonomous political force, tying it instead to the fate of a generic 'people'," and traced that approach back to the Popular Fronts of the 1930s. But their working assumption was that a sufficiently powerful impulse from the "mass worker" would pull the PCI back onto an autonomous working-class line. Although — influenced by the ex-Trotskyists James, Dunayevskaya, Castoriadis — they were critical of the USSR, they sneered at the Trotskyists' preoccupations.

"It is clear that we are not interested in the theme of the relationships between

Togliatti [long-term PCI leader] and Stalin... We gladly leave it to the Trotskyists: this is not the heart of the problem. The heart of the problem lies in the relation between the PCI and the working class.”

Potere Operaia (a revolutionary-left group) wrote in 1968 that “the political terrain on which the relation between workers and capitalist is measured is that of the factory... What yesterday was economic, today is the only real political terrain; what yesterday was political, today has become appearance”. Even today Negri believes of the great upsurge of industrial militancy that began in 1968 that “this worker attack was completely political — even when many mass practices, particularly of youth, seemed decidedly apolitical — insofar as it exposed and struck at the political nerve centres of the economic organisation of capital” (p.262).

That notion of industrial militancy being immediately and “completely” political — perhaps sharpened in reaction against the sort of approach that had the French Communist Party preaching that the general strike of May 1968, in France, could not have had any revolutionary implications because it was “economic” action, and “politics” was something different — would serve as a pivot around which many of the basic ideas of workerism were, between 1968 and 1979, turned into their opposite.

A big student radicalisation developed in Italy from 1967, and a huge surge of industrial militancy from 1968. The revolutionary left grew quicker and more than anywhere else in the world for many decades. By the mid 1970s there were three revolutionary-left groups, Avanguardia Operaia, Lotta Continua, and PDUP, each with tens of thousands of activists and its own daily paper. Negri, from 1967 to 1973, would lead a fourth group, Potere Operaia, with maybe three to four thousand members. All preached that Italy was on the brink of socialist revolution. The extent to which even the “big three” (which were more “political” than Negri’s group was by then) failed to get to grips with politics would be demonstrated when they ran a joint slate in the general election of June 1976, produced an extravagantly muddled platform, and scored just 1.5%, while the PCI notched up its best-ever score of 34.4%. By the end of the 1970s all the groups had collapsed.

In 1968-9 the university-based radicals got a good hearing from, and were able to influence and organise, thousands of young workers. The workerists divided. Tronti and others retreated into the ranks of the PCI. Negri’s group argued that 1968 was for the PCI what August 1914 had been for the Second International, and soon “was satisfied to paint the relationship between workers and PCI as one of pure repression, or else hint darkly at the parasitic nature of the [relatively well-paid] workforce in the large factories”.

By 1970, however, the union leaders had lifted their act dramatically, led sizeable struggles winning sizeable gains, and regained hegemony in the factories. Meanwhile, successive waves of “social” struggles developed — refusal to pay increased rents, fares, or electricity charges; squatting; a battle for abortion rights; more. The far right developed its “strategy of tension” — indiscriminate bombings, which would culminate in the killing of 85 people by bombs at Bologna railway station in August 1980. Violent and even fatal clashes between left-wing demonstrators on one side, and fascists or police on the other, became commonplace on the streets.

Negri’s group had been right, I think, to see big-factory struggles as strategically central. To see them as immediately revolutionary was, however, another matter — and an error. “Factoryism” failed. But then Negri’s group dealt with the failure by abandoning the sound idea of an orientation to the big factories yet sticking to the false idea that immediate proletarian struggles were already fully revolutionary. Yes, the “worker attack” was still “completely political” — only the composition of the proletariat had changed. The proletariat was now not the

“mass worker” in the factory, but the “socialised worker” — in short, students, housewives, unemployed people, workers in small factories, anyone who was active in the new “social” struggles.

In the workerists' ears, the pounding of their own pulses as they fought the police on the streets had made them incapable of hearing, let alone listening to, the modulations of the “murmuring in the proletariat”. A mid-1970s of windy rhetoric about “the armed party”, “insurrection”, “proletarian justice”, and the revolutionary merits of “sabotage” culminated in demoralisation, collapse, and the jailing of Negri himself and hundreds of others in 1979 on charges (mostly trumped up) of involvement with the Red Brigades, a leftist-militarist group which in March-May 1978 had kidnapped and then killed Aldo Moro, chief leader of the Christian Democratic Party.

Today Negri might adopt Joni Mitchell's words:

*I've looked at life from both sides now  
From up and down, and still somehow  
It's life's illusions I recall  
I really don't know life at all*

As he himself says, *Empire*, with its unspecified, unspecifiable, vague idea of “refusal” as a spontaneously-communist counter-Empire, is really only an essay, and “a bit mechanistic” at that, in “translating the workerist schema” of the anti-“factoryist” phase “to the international level”. Valuable ideas float in a warm pool of theologico-philosophical bliss. They need to be fished out of that, and reconstructed on dry ground.

## Stalinism

THE WORKERISTS were critical of the USSR, but dismissed Trotskyism as historical pedantry, off-beam from attention to the living workers' struggle. That dismissiveness cost them dear. Negri considered the USSR to be state-capitalist — but it was state-capitalist essentially because it was not different enough from the West. The ways in which it did differ from the West must still, in his eyes, have had some allure of “communism”. His group did not resist the widespread “soft Maoism” of the Italian revolutionary left in the 1970s; and in *Empire*, while indicating sympathy with the Tienanmen Square insurgents, he still equates “the communist revolutions of 1917 [in Russia, by the workers] and 1949 [in China, by Mao's Stalinists]”. He even writes that when “socialist Russia” confronted Nazi Germany in World War Two, it was really a matter of “class subjects in conflict” (p.110). Listing the atrocities of the 20th century (p.46), he omits the crimes of Stalinism. In a book apparently about the new shape of the world after 1991, Stalinism bizarrely figures less than the Roman Empire, the 18th century United States, or Renaissance Europe.

The anti-Stalinist overturns of 1989 represent, in fact, a very large part in the element of truth in Negri's conception of the new global order being shaped by the persistent “refusals” of the “multitude”. “Refusals”, in which the working class figured only as part of the “multitude”, did bring down the Stalinist regimes. They were very far, however, from being immediately “a resistance that becomes love and community”, or one that produced “a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism”. If they produced anything in a “spontaneous and elementary” form, it was market capitalism.

For other writers developing ideas similar to Negri's, like John Holloway in his new book *Change the world without taking power: the meaning of revolution today*, the lesson from Stalinism is that we must develop a politics which is “revolutionary” without falling into the trap of taking state power. Negri, in *Empire*, does not explicitly draw that conclusion, though, as we have seen, he does write

cryptically about it no longer being possible for “social space [to] be transformed using the instruments of the state”. He writes of the need for a new “common language” to be found to replace that of “anti-imperialism and proletarian internationalism” — that is, of Stalinism — which he takes as good coin for the epoch before “Empire”. But he has already buried the vital elements of that “common language” which 1960s “workerism” began to develop from the Marxist sources.

### “New imperialism”

**T**URNING FROM *Empire* to the articles in which John Rees, Alex Callinicos and other SWP writers expound their doctrine of the “new imperialism” is at first a relief. No thousand “what? oh!”s here. The writing is clear, the concepts are intelligible, the footnotes fit the footnoted text, the account proceeds by reference to specific countries, events, and economic statistics.

I will summarise three key articles: *The new imperialism* (Rees, *International Socialism* 48, September 1990); *Marxism and imperialism* (Callinicos, *IS* 50, Spring 1991); and *Imperialism: globalisation, the state, and war* (Rees, *IS* 93, December 2001). The first two articles were reprinted (with some revisions) in a book, *Marxism and the new imperialism* (1994); the third is a reprise of the ideas in the light of ten years’ experience. Some other articles — two by Chris Harman on *The state and capital* (*IS* 51) and *The return of the national question* (*IS* 56), and a running debate between Callinicos and Nigel Harris around the same time — are also important, but I will not summarise them here.

Rees, in 1990, was writing just after Iraq had invaded Kuwait and the USA had begun its plans for the war of retaliation which it would carry through in early 1991; also, soon after the collapse of East European Stalinism in 1989, and just before the collapse of the USSR in mid-1991.

He opened his article by deriding George Bush Sr’s claim that the US would now inaugurate a new world order. The USA did not have the strength for it. The USA was in decline relative to other major capitalist powers.

With the end of the Cold War, arms spending had declined. But only to a limited extent; the arsenals were still growing. Rees did not, even at that stage, discount the possibility of the USSR figuring as a serious rival to the declining USA. The USSR was still a superpower; it might well be able to pull together a “little Warsaw Pact” from the remains of its empire in Eastern Europe.

Rees discerned three main tendencies in the new shape of the world in 1990. First, to economic crisis. Second, to the formation of trade blocs (round the USA, round the European Union, round Japan).

Third, and most significantly, to increasing instability and open rivalry in the relations between the bigger powers, and in particular between the USA and Germany and Japan (and presumably the still-a-superpower USSR). The motor driving that increased instability and open rivalry was the unfreezing of configurations and relations frozen by the Cold War, and the relative decline of the USA.

The “emerging imperialist rivalries”, argued Rees, would “in this limited sense” take the world back to something like the pattern “between the wars or even before the First World War”. Of course, since then the colonies had won independence. But that in turn would be a factor of instability. There would be conflicts over regional dominance between ex-colonies, or ex-semi-colonies, now become independent regional powers; and the big powers would be drawn into those conflicts.

The article was written with specific political questions in mind. The SWP had just declared that Saddam Hussein “should have the support of all socialists” in his confrontation with the USA. The general message that there was a “new

imperialism”, similar to that of pre-1914, must have given comfort to that attitude. However, nothing specific in the article gave detailed backing to the attitude. On the contrary: if the article, in detail rather than headline, pointed anywhere on the confrontation over Kuwait, it was in a different direction. Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait was surely one of the essays in “regional dominance” mentioned towards the end of Rees’s article. Why would socialists want to support that, even if the USA were drawn in? We could oppose the USA’s intervention without supporting Iraq.

### Kautsky as trampoline

CALLINICOS’S ARTICLE early the next year filled in the gaps, and set its ideas in a much more pretentious theoretical framework. It started by declaring that the USA’s war against Iraq “showed that imperialism, in the most general sense of the naked use of force to impose the will of major powers on smaller states [was] still flourishing”. That begged two questions. First, had the USA’s war been “imperialist” or “imperial”, in the sense of the distinction coined by Negri and Hardt? Concerned to create, maintain or enlarge a US colonial or semi-colonial empire, or sphere of influence? Or concerned to mend a fabric of state relations for the “imperialism of free trade”?

And, second, why did Callinicos not cite an even clearer recent example of “naked use of force to impose the will of [relatively] major powers on smaller states” — Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait? Why was that not “imperialist”?

Callinicos, however, then set out to move from that “most general” notion of imperialism to a more theorised one. Bourgeois pundits said that the internationalisation of capital was making war obsolete. But, claimed Callinicos, they were repeating errors made by Karl Kautsky when, in an article published just after the start of the First World War, he speculated on the possibility of an “ultra-imperialism” under which the big powers would form a sort of cartel for joint exploitation of the less-capitalistically-developed countries and thus eliminate war between themselves. (See elsewhere in this *Workers’ Liberty*).

Callinicos here essentially assumed a point which Chris Harman’s article in the next issue of *IS* (no.51) would argue in detail. The nation-state, contrary to Negri and Hardt, was not fading away. And most capitalist corporations, including those called “multinationals”, remained tied to a particular national base, and to their home “nation-state”. I think Harman and Callinicos were essentially right about this. Some of Harman’s detailed arguments I find dubious, and I don’t think he sufficiently takes account of how the functioning of capitalist nation-states has changed since the 1980s — not diminished, but changed — but on the point that is central for this argument, he was right.

And of course the bourgeois pundits were indeed wrong about George Bush Sr bringing a new era of world harmony.

But Callinicos’s dismissal of Kautsky begged some questions. In the first place, Kautsky did not argue, not even in 1914, that closer economic interconnectedness of the main capitalist states automatically brought peace. Kautsky specifically refuted that notion. In the second place, by 1991 wasn’t it a question of the *fact* that the big capitalist powers were linked together in a network of cartel-type arrangements, rather than of the value of speculations about whether they *could* be?

Callinicos was essentially using Kautsky as a trampoline off which to bounce himself into what he described as “the Marxist theory” of imperialism, namely the writings of Lenin and Bukharin.

Callinicos argued (rightly, I think) against the common idea that export of capital was the central concept of Lenin’s theory of imperialism. What distinguished Lenin was not his references to export of capital, or to finance capital — in which

he only echoed the younger Kautsky — but his ruthless focus on the emerging “domination of monopolist associations of big employers” and the bias of states dominated by them towards “violence and reaction”.

Also rightly, in my view, Callinicos focused on Bukharin’s concept of imperialism being determined by the interplay between two simultaneous but clashing tendencies of capitalist development — towards the “nationalisation” of capital (by which Bukharin meant, not just state ownership of capital, but closer entwinement or involvement of capitals with the state) and towards its “internationalisation”. In the world of the early 20th century, those tendencies played themselves out by the constitution of large rival industrial complexes, clustered round and interacting with powerful nation-states, which sought territory to “internationalise” by carving out competing colonial empires and spheres of influence.

Callinicos claimed that Lenin essentially shared Bukharin’s approach. That, I think, is not quite true. In his pamphlet on *Imperialism* Lenin deliberately fought shy of talk of the productive forces outstripping national frameworks, and of the inexorable “internationalisation” of capital (concepts first introduced into the Marxist debate, as far as I know, by Rosa Luxemburg), because he was wary of their use by Bukharin and others to argue that national self-determination was now a hopeless cause condemned by economic development.

It is, however, a secondary point. Callinicos was right, I think, to focus on Bukharin’s concept of the two tendencies, “nationalising”/“internationalising”, as the most fruitful general theoretical framework produced by the Bolsheviks’ discussion of imperialism. Again, a question is begged.

How has the interaction of those two tendencies played itself out in recent decades? The plain fact is that the “internationalising” tendency has predominated over the “nationalising” one, and even pushed it back somewhat. This sows seeds of crisis for the future: for example, it means the creation of huge masses of mobile money capital whose movements, outside the control of any nation-state, could wreck the world monetary system in the way that they wrecked the European Exchange Rate Mechanism in 1992. But it is a fact for the present.

Callinicos went on to delineate three “phases” of imperialism: “classical”, between 1875 and 1945; “superpower imperialism”, between 1945 and 1990; and “imperialism after the Cold War”, since 1990. This latter “new imperialism” was “in fact a more unstable version of the old”, i.e., presumably, of “classical” imperialism.

*Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.*

In discussing the second phase (“superpower imperialism”) Callinicos recognised that in that period, of Bukharin’s two tendencies, the “second tendency [internationalisation] was dominant”. In an inversion (equally one-sided) of Negri and Hardt’s picture of “Empire” as being generated by the strivings of the multitude, Callinicos attributed the fall of Stalinism exclusively to that internal tendency of capital. And he made no claim that the dominance of that tendency had been reversed since 1990.

However, he emphasised that the new regime was “politically multipolar”; that the nation-state had not faded away; that private capital still had essential links with “home” nation-states. He deduced that there would be strong tendencies to the creation of trade blocs. In the 1994 reprinting of his article, he saw the Maastricht scheme for creating a single European currency as “in tatters”.

Like Rees, though less emphatically and with more qualifications, he argued that the USA was in relative decline. That relative decline of the USA, coupled with the “unfreezing” due to the end of the Cold War, would create instability in the balance between the big powers.

### Callinicos on wars

**S**O FAR, so good for the idea that we now had a repeat, but more unstable, version of “the old”, “classical” imperialism. Going further, Callinicos argued that the US had already embarked on a “war drive” to “reassert leadership” in face of its relative economic decline. The USA’s war drive was thus not a “globo-cop” operation to deal with rips in the state fabric of the “imperialism of free trade” (a matter of “imperial war”, in Hardt’s and Negri’s terminology); nor was it a matter of trying to create a new US empire, formal or informal; it was a matter of upholding the USA’s influence and prestige against threats of being eclipsed by other powers.

On that account, the USA’s Gulf war of 1991 would be a blow to uphold US prestige against Germany and Japan; its war of 1999 over Kosova, a venture to uphold US leadership against the European Union; its Afghan war on 2001 an effort to maintain US domination in central Asia, against Russia, Iran, or European powers. They were all “proxy wars”, directed in reality not against Iraq, or Serbia, or the Taliban, but against the USA’s big-power rivals. Such interpretations are difficult to sustain against the facts of cooperation, and military or financial aid, for those US wars from the powers that they were allegedly directed against, but can be found in SWP literature dealing with those wars. The interpretations would give some plausibility to calling those wars “imperialist” in the “classic” sense, though not much to the political conclusion desired by the SWP — side with Iraq, or Serbia, or the Taliban, against the USA. If the real issues were the USA “reasserting leadership” as against the other big powers, or those powers grabbing bigger influence and prestige, then why should we be on the side of more influence and prestige for the European, or Japanese, capitalist powers?

In general, Callinicos saw two likely causes of war in coming years: one, regional powers, ex-colonial states now politically independent and having acquired some little capitalist clout, would “take risks”; the second, upsurges of “revolutionary nationalism”.

His discussion of the ex-colonial world suggested that the “revolutionary nationalist” case would be unusual.

He was as emphatic as Negri and Hardt are in disputing the common view on the left that the old colonial empires had only “formally” been dissolved. No, said Callinicos, the ex-colonial countries had won political independence; they were not “neo-colonies”; some had seen considerable capitalist development; some had acquired considerable clout in their regions and become “sub-imperialist” powers; the notion of “sub-imperialism” should not be interpreted (as it has been by some) to mean that these powers were only junior partners of bigger imperialist centres; they had ambitions of their own. He even went out of his way to insist that “it would be a mistake to see the debt crisis as simply marking the imposition of a new form of ‘dependency’ on the Third World... The debt crisis involves not so much a conflict between nation states, rich versus poor countries, but a class struggle, in which the Latin American bourgeoisie, increasingly integrated into international financial circuits, aligns itself with the Western banks...”

Did not all that, together with the continued predominance of Bukharin’s “second tendency” (internationalisation of capital), define a world markedly different from, and not just a “more unstable version of the old”? Callinicos left that question unanswered, and indeed unasked, and went on to discuss the Iraq/Kuwait war (just finished, as he wrote) together with the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88 and the South Atlantic war between Britain and Argentina, over the Falkland Islands, in 1982.

On the South Atlantic war, he approvingly quoted the Argentine Marxists

Dabat and Lorenzano, arguing that this was a war between an “emergent capitalist country with regional imperialist features”, and a declining old imperialist power. Socialists should oppose the war on both sides. That, in fact, had been the stance of the SWP at the time.

In congruence with that stance, the SWP had also opposed the Iran-Iraq war on both sides, describing it as a war between two rival sub-imperialist powers.

However, in the summer of 1987, the USA — fearing an Iranian victory, and pursuing its settled policy of wanting neither Iran nor Iraq to win a clear victory — sent warships to the Gulf to back up Iraq. This move, which succeeded in ending the war in a stalemate, changed nothing in the essence of the conflict. The SWP switched its stance, started siding with Iran, and indeed suggested that it would have been best to side with Iran from the start. This shift of line was the start of a general change of approach by the SWP. Previously as hostile to “Third Worldism” as Negri, if not more so, it would start siding with any smaller power in conflict with the USA. It would do so even if — as with Iraq in 1991 — they had only a short while before denounced that very same smaller power as a catspaw for US imperialism.

The general tone and language of “the new imperialism”, the general idea that we were back in a period where the old formulas of Lenin’s day were once again up-to-date, certainly helped the shift. But the detailed arguing-through in Callinicos’s article was more puzzling.

He started with an exercise in “on the one hand, on the other”. On the one hand, some people denied the reality of colonial independence and the rise of sub-imperialisms. On the other hand, others overestimated it, to the extent of arguing that there was no longer any hierarchy of powers in the capitalist world, and Iran, for example, was essentially on the same level as the USA. The folly produced by the second deviation was exemplified in the first Gulf War by Iranian socialists who failed to side with their own country against Iraq; in the second Gulf War by *New Left Review*’s declaration that socialists “should not support the military ambitions of any of the predators now confronting one another in the desert”.

But why *should* socialists support the military ambitions of any of the predators? Why side with the Iraqi predator against the US predator just because it was weaker? Callinicos made much of the USA’s relatively easy victory as proving how much weaker Iraq was. But only a few months before Rees, in his article, had been openly dubious about the USA’s chances of victory against Iraq. In any case, why should socialists support a weaker predator against a stronger? How can the socialist commitment to equality mean an obligation to boost our weaker enemies and bring them closer to equality with our stronger enemies? And if the principle of supporting the weaker predator were valid, why should we not have supported Argentina in the South Atlantic war?

Leaving those questions unanswered, Callinicos proceeded to a peroration where he hailed Lenin as “the” theorist of imperialism — for our own days, presumably, as well as his own. Lenin deserved that credit for two reasons. The first reason, so Callinicos argued, was that Lenin had recognised imperialism “as a stage, indeed the highest stage of capitalist development”. Puzzling. Callinicos himself had, only pages earlier, recognised two further stages after the one Lenin wrote about. He had softened the blow by the claim that the third stage was really just a new version of the first; but the differences between the third stage and the first, on Callinicos’s own detailed enumeration — as opposed to his summary label — were large.

The second reason, wrote Callinicos, was that Lenin had recognised the significance of revolutionary nationalism. True enough. Callinicos then went on to equate a stance of support for Iran against Iraq in the first Gulf War, or for Iraq

against the USA in the second, with Lenin's and Trotsky's solidarity with revolutionary nationalism against the big powers of their day.

He cited Lenin's comment on the Irish rising of Easter 1916 — no-one who expects to see a social revolution pure, without an uprising of the "petty bourgeoisie with all their prejudices", will ever see one — and an article by Trotsky arguing that socialists should side with the Chinese people, even under the leadership of Chiang Kai Shek, against Japan's attempt to conquer China in the 1930s. Oddly, though, he made no explicit effort to argue that Iran's ruling mullahs were "revolutionary nationalists" comparable to the Irish rebels of 1916, or that Iraq's attempt to keep hold of Kuwait represented a battle for "democracy and national independence" (which is how Trotsky defined the issues over China and Japan in 1937). Any reader asking why and how Iran and Iraq should be fitted into the second of Callinicos's earlier categories — "revolutionary nationalists" — rather than the first, regional powers "taking risks" for self-aggrandisement, was left wondering.

In short, if Negri's theorising is "Marx backwards", Callinicos's was "Lenin forwards" — the name, prestige, and phrases of Lenin stretched forwards to cover the "new imperialism", but with a detailed account that left awkward corners poking out of the Lenin costume.

### Ten years on

**I**N SUMMARISING the writings of Rees and Callinicos from 1990-4, it would be facile and false to mock them for being too "pessimistic for capitalism" in their predictions of trade blocs, continued US decline, the failure of the European single currency project, great crises, and so on. In the first place, it is in a sense a duty for socialists to be "pessimistic for capitalism", to lay stress on the contradictions and conflicts, rather than on the possibility that the bourgeoisie will muddle through. In the second place, it was by no means so clear then that the "globalist" sectors of the bourgeoisies would predominate in the way they actually did in the 1990s. I myself wrote in 1992 that the European Exchange Rate Mechanism crisis meant that the project of a single European currency was off the agenda for a long time; I too saw the pressures to form walled-off trade blocs as real and threatening; I too saw the USA as in a relative decline which would continue.

However, Rees, Callinicos and I were all wrong. The single European currency may collapse; a major new world crisis would create new pressures for trade blocs; but over the last ten years the "globalist" option has, on the whole, won out in almost every capitalist camp. The "second tendency", for the internationalisation of capital, has proceeded apace, under the aegis of continued US superpower.

John Rees, writing in *IS* 93 (December 2001), had a chance to review the earlier arguments in the light of the experience. He was prompted to do so by the US war in Afghanistan.

He started by recognising that globalisation — "internationalisation of capital", in broad terms — had proceeded, but also asserting "the failure of globalisation". What had globalisation "failed" to do? Rees cited figures for pauperisation, inequality, and so on. But those are more like evidence for the *success* of globalisation, as a path of capitalist development. That is what capitalism is about.

How did Rees see "globalisation" in the overall perspective of capitalist development. Was it, as some hold, a process of "reconquest" of the world by the USA (or "the West", or "imperialism"), so that socialists must respond to it with a blanket across-the-board "no"? Or was it a further stage of capitalist development, producing new forces, new passions, new contradictions, so that it was futile (or worse, effective support for outdated capitalism against new capital-

ism; specifically, nationalist) to try to back out of it? So that socialists had to identify and base ourselves on those new forces, passions, contradictions?

The tune of Rees's song, so to speak, suggested the "reconquest" thesis, "the determination of the Western powers to dominate", and so on. Yet close attention to the lyrics suggested a different perspective. Harman and Callinicos had written about capital evolving into "trans-state capital". What sense can it make for socialists to want to push back capital into single-state forms?

Rees left the question unresolved. His deduction from what he called "the failure of globalisation" was that the world would see *turmoil and instability*.

He restated the argument (from Harman) about capital still being tied to nation-states. He noted the increased clout of global institutions (IMF, World Bank, WTO, etc.), but — recalling Bukharin's argument about the two tendencies, "nationalisation" and "internationalisation" of capital — saw nationalism as also increasing (on the rather vague grounds of it being a search for stable cultural identity in an increasing tumultuous world).

Increased turmoil; a world still dominated by potentially rival nation-states — he had reprised those essential elements from the articles of the early 1990s. He then got straight on with discussing specific issues, bringing in other themes from those earlier articles as he went along.

Rees did not disavow Callinicos's early-1990s acknowledgement of the reality of political independence and capitalist development in the ex-colonial countries. In his screenplay, however, the ex-colonial world would only do crowd scenes, providing "turmoil" and "failure" as a lead-in to the main story, i.e. US-led war.

The starting point of the Balkan wars had arisen, he wrote, "from the determination of the Western powers to dominate the region", and from oil interests.

In fact both the USA and the European Union continued to urge all the subject nations of former Yugoslavia to remain under Belgrade rule until it was clear beyond doubt that they would refuse to do so. Germany then moved more quickly for recognition of independence for Croatia and Slovenia — this, only after their peoples had already voted by over 90% majorities to separate — than the other big powers. How that means that the break-up of Yugoslavia served the interests of "the West", I do not know.

Even more puzzling from the point of view of general theory, how could a concept like "the West" make sense if Rees were still upholding — as he seemed to be — the basic ideas of his and Callinicos's theory from the early 1990s? Although Callinicos had started his article then by referring to "the West's war" in the Gulf, that could be taken as just shorthand for the particular coalition in that particular war. A keystone of the earlier theory was the idea that "the West", frozen into a more-or-less cohesive unit by the pressures of Cold War, would now break apart into open rivalries.

Rees argued that a key determinant of the Kosova war in 1999 was the concern of the USA for pipeline routes for oil from central Asia. All he established, as far as I can see, is that some US and oil industry strategists had a plan for a pipeline to take oil already transmitted from central Asia through Azerbaijan and Turkey across the sea to Macedonia and then via Albania to the Mediterranean.

Doubtless one of the US government's concerns over Kosova was that the conflict there caused by "excess" Serbian brutality and Kosovar resistance would destabilise the whole region — Albania, Macedonia, Greece, Turkey — and thus threaten all sorts of interests. That, to my mind, makes NATO's Kosova war one for "imperial order" (in Hardt's and Negri's sense) rather than "imperialist" (in the sense of being about the democracy and national independence of Serbia). It establishes no argument why socialists should have sided with Serbia. Did the Serbian government oppose the pipeline on a "revolutionary nationalist" basis

(to reprise Callinicos's categories)? Or at all? Should socialists have opposed the pipeline as such? Why? Or was the conflict about a "regional power" "taking risks" — specifically, taking what Milosevic took to be a chance to accomplish the longstanding Serbian-imperialist programme of destroying and driving out the Kosovar Albanian people?

Rees did not answer those questions. What he did do — as far as I can see, more by word-association than by detailed argument — was to present the Kosova war as exemplifying the return of patterns "that predated the rise of the Stalinist states in Eastern Europe and, indeed, even the Russian Revolution" [of 1917] or of the "scramble for Africa" (by different European powers, to seize areas for their respective colonial empires) in the late 19th century. "Determination to dominate", "oil interests" — these phrases give an appropriate ring to the argument, but they do not establish the case.

The Gulf war of 1991, continued Rees, had been the first manifestation of the "new imperialism". Here again we saw at work the "American elite", which had "propelled us all into three major wars in a decade".

As with Rees's previous phrase about "the West" desiring to dominate in ex-Yugoslavia, the argument here was an important but unacknowledged shift from that of the early 1990s. In the argument of the early 1990s, the factor making for war was the many-sided rivalry between the USA and other powers threatening its dwindling hegemony — Germany, Japan, maybe Russia. It could make no sense to present the "American elite" one-sidedly as the sole force pushing for war.

The SWP's (unsigned) popular pamphlet about the war in Afghanistan, also published early in 2001, was written as if "imperialism", "globalisation", "the West" and "the USA" were all essentially alternative names for the same thing. Rees's article tried to be more balanced. Though in one passage writing of the USA's "imperial dominance" of the world, on the whole he maintained his earlier view that the USA was far too weak to make the world into a US empire. He retained, also, the notion that wars like that in Afghanistan had the character of proxy battles in which the USA was motivated not so much by any conflict with Afghanistan itself as by a drive to do down other big powers by way of a war in Afghanistan. How this tallied with the USA's ability — and need, so Rees himself stressed — to gain support and cooperation for its war from those same powers it was trying to do down, he did not explain.

The theme of rivalry unfrozen by the end of the Cold War was generally much less prominent in Rees's 2001 article than in the earlier ones. Also in the article was a new cause for war. "Where globalisation fails, the military must step in."

By globalisation "failing", here he seemed to mean something distinct from his first use of the term, where the "failure" was constituted by pauperisation and inequality. In this context, Rees referred to state structures and networks "failing" at "maintaining stability". The background idea is roughly the same as in Hardt's and Negri's concept of "imperial wars", fought for imperial order rather than specific imperialist interests.

A "Third Camp" stance in such wars would generally follow, unless you take the view that anything that thwarts or obstructs globalisation should automatically be supported. Hardt and Negri, as we have seen, explicitly reject that idea. The SWP authors are unclear. Their theoretical articles — such as Harman's on the state and capital — describe globalisation as a matter of capital moving beyond the "state-capitalist" stage. If that is so, then to try to thwart or obstruct globalisation as such is a futile and backward-looking attempt to pour new wine into old bottles it has long since overspilled; the Marxist approach must be to fight the class struggle within the process of globalisation and "push through" it. In their popular pamphlets, however, "globalisation" is equated with "imperi-

alism”, and flatly opposed. And in fact that seemed to be Rees’s thought at that point in his article; the context suggested that in wars where “globalisation has failed” and the US “military step in”, we should side against the USA with those who have made globalisation “fail”, in the sense of disrupting world order, more or less whoever they are.

In a final section, Rees returned to general theory. He reprised Callinicos’s polemic on Kautsky, though garbling it by claiming that Kautsky argued that ultra-imperialism had already developed and would make wars impossible. (Obviously Kautsky didn’t do that, since he published the article when World War One was not only “possible” but a fact.)

The left, Rees went on, was in disarray on the question of imperialism. Having lost the Stalinophilic compass which made them back the opponents of the USA in almost any clash, many leftists had now supported the USA in the Gulf war of 1991 or in the Kosova war in 1999 because of the horrible nature of the Iraqi and Serbian regimes.

They were inconsistent, charged Rees. They backed Cuba, despite its horrible regime, against the USA. The principle of the right of nations to self-determination should make them reject the idea that the bad regimes in Iraq or Serbia justified US war against them. Like Callinicos in 1991, Rees quoted Lenin on Ireland in 1916.

He still did not address the question of whether Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Milosevic could properly be equated with the Irish rebels of 1916, or whether the 1991 and 1999 wars had actually been essentially about the rights to self-determination of Iraq or Serbia. He gave no answer to those who supported NATO in the 1999 war not because they neglected the right of nations to self-determination but because they valued it — for the Kosovar Albanian nation — nor to those who took a “Third Camp” position in those wars.

However, Rees seemed to think there were questions still unanswered, and in the last part of the article he introduced a new argument, not made in the early-1990s articles. This argument seemed to be an attempt to grapple with objections along such lines as: “You say Saddam Hussein was a catspaw of imperialism against Iran in 1987-8, but then an anti-imperialist force in Kuwait in 1990-1. You say that the Taliban and Osama bin Laden were built up by the USA, as pro-imperialist forces, but now that they become anti-imperialist forces when they are in conflict with the USA. Please explain.”

Rees’s exposition was confusing because he posed the question as: “Whether or not we oppose imperialism is determined by the totality of relations in the system at any one point, and not only by the internal character of the regimes that find themselves, however ineffectively, opposed to imperialism.. He can hardly have meant that. Socialists oppose imperialism at every “point” and whatever the “totality of relations”. What he must have meant is: “Whether or not to side with a force in conflict with a big power must depend on the totality of relations in each case.” And the question was begged by rewording “in conflict with a big power” as “opposed to imperialism”. Was the Iraqi state “opposed to imperialism” in 1990-1? Or was, it rather, in Callinicos’s terms, a “regional power taking risks”, trying to sustain its own small venture in imperialism, and coming into conflict with the USA as “globo-cop”?

Of course Rees has a point. The same regime or nation can be imperialistic, fighting for domination over a weaker nation, one day, and fight for its own national liberation the next. Socialists should surely have solidarised with the Armenians fighting against genocide by Kemal Ataturk’s forces in World War One Turkey; yet the Comintern sided with the same Ataturk’s Turkey against Greece in the war between them, after World War One, where the Comintern (with good cause) judged Greece to be acting as the catspaw of British imperial-

ism, which was then occupying Constantinople. Socialists should side with the Palestinians against the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem; but if the USA should unexpectedly switch alliances and support, or condone, a war by the Arab states to wipe Israel off the map, then we would side with Israel even under Ariel Sharon.

In all those cases, however, the questions of national self-determination involved are clear. Rees's translation of "regimes in conflict with a big power" into "regimes opposed to imperialism" begs the question.

### Lenin forwards

LIKE NEGRI'S and Hardt's, the account by Callinicos and Rees — especially in Callinicos's rendering — has a theological taste to it. But where Negri's and Hardt's is enthusiastic, mystical theology, Callinicos's is the theology of the worldly-wise, "moderate" prelate of a modern established church.

Yes, Darwin was right; God is not an old man in the sky; much of the Bible is self-contradictory and obviously garbled — but, still, God is God, and the Bible is his word. Yes, the old system of a world divided up into colonial empires and spheres of influence is gone; yes, the pattern of each state trying to build its own more-or-less integrated national industrial complex has shifted in favour of an orientation to what Harman calls "trans-state capital"; yes, the ex-colonial countries are politically independent and in several of them substantial capitalist development is a fact; yes, autonomous sub-imperialist centres exist and their propensity to "take risks" is a major factor making for wars — but, still, Lenin is "the" theorist of imperialism, not just for his day, but for ours.

To turn Lenin's *Imperialism* into a Bible in this way is disloyal to Lenin, and an obstacle to analysing the world as it develops and changes.

Both Hardt/Negri and Callinicos/Rees, therefore, thus slide off the narrow and slippery path of scientific analysis — substituting speculative construction for empirical investigation in one case, dragging the ill-fitting costume of yesterday's theory onto today's reality so as better to be able to agitate about "imperialism — just like Lenin condemned" in the other.

Neither account is worthless, however. In discussing them we have to deal with important questions. What are the limits of US hegemony? How stable is it? What is the role of nation-states today? Has it diminished? Has it changed, and how? How much further have the international institutions (G8, IMF, WTO, World Bank) gone towards creating a "supranational quasi-state"? How stable is the current "ultra-imperialist" cartel organised through such institutions? To what extent is a real transnational capitalist class developing, over and above national capitalist classes? What modifications does the new importance of information-production make to capitalist relations and the structure of the working class? To what extent does the current structure of the world economy bear the impress of the class and national struggles of recent decades, and to what extent is it a product of evolutions of technology and the internal logic of capital?

On all of these questions there is much more investigation to be done after criticising what Hardt/Negri and Callinicos/Rees have to say on them: the criticism may set some starting points and help to map out the ground.

1. My estimate in WL 59/60 that the wage-working class might now be the world's majority was over-optimistic. This estimate, for around 1990, based on World Bank Working Paper 1488, [http://econ.worldbank.org/files/846\\_wps1488.pdf](http://econ.worldbank.org/files/846_wps1488.pdf).

2. Figures, from *Forbes* magazine, inexact. The magazine's own breakdown giving the numbers in the 500 headquartered in various countries adds up to a lot fewer than 500. *Fortune* magazine's global top 500 has slightly fewer in the USA and slightly more in the "Third World".