

Report on Michael Hardt Lecture
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Michael Hardt, Chair of Duke University's Program in Literature, visited Virginia Tech on 23 February 2012 as part of the Alliance for Social, Political, Ethical and Cultural Thought's inaugural annual lecture. The lecture occurred in the Graduate Life Center's Auditorium where a very diverse crowd assembled to hear the leading scholar best known for his books *Empire* (2001) and *Multitude* (2005) — both coauthored with Italian dissident Antonio Negri.

Hardt looked at resistance movements in 2011 ranging from Tahrir square, to Greece, and to the Occupy protests across the United States. He compared these movements by employing a vast theoretical apparatus derived from critical theory since Marx. Hardt focused on four sites of contestation in the current economic and political crises around the globe — debt, democracy, technology, and the security society. Describing the four sites, Hardt explained how resistance movements tried to reconstitute alternative normative meanings for the sites in order to redefine our subjectivity. Finally, Hardt explored how we are produced as subjects in these sites.

Hardt analyzed debt as a political tool, likening the indebtedness of most people to a new form of indentured servitude, whereby debt order guarantees productivity. He underscored a transition during the 20th century where industrialized countries witnessed a transformation from a welfare society to a debt society. Increasingly, debt became a more generalized condition. Hardt's critique addressed the inversion of freedom in a debt society. He showed debt as an unequal relationship in which the myth of freedom of exchange in capitalist society erodes.

Hardt detailed the myth of the free and equal exchange between workers who sell the commodity of their labor to capitalists who have the commodity of wage. With the generalized debt condition, workers no longer can exchange their labor freely since they already owe. Thus, workers are compelled to work given the burden of their debt. The indebted are free to work only to satisfy debt. Workers cannot be free because debt creates bonds and relationships that demand productivity.

Hardt likened debt to the power of morality and discipline. Debt disciplines workers to internalize their debt as a responsibility and, so, engenders the creation of a work ethic. By internalizing debt as a condition, subjects become guilty if they do not cultivate a work ethic to mitigate their debt. Hardt mentioned that the German word for debt and guilty are the same word. Guilt, then, becomes an element of debt's control.

In a debt society, we witness key aspects of the debt condition. Hardt identified one aspect as the mystification of our productivity. Our productive capacity becomes linked to the satisfaction of paying our debt. The perpetual condition of debt constitutes the capacity of our productivity where we must produce presently in order to pay for prior debt. Thus, our productivity satisfies the condition of debt without generating surplus.

In another aspect of the debt condition, inequality is hidden because we must work to pay off our debts. The imperative to pay off debt constitutes the debt subject as someone who owes. Inequality is obscured because the debt subject can always be blamed for their condition of indebtedness. Our productive capacities are required not only to satisfy the need to repay debt, but also in order to insure that present productivity never achieves surplus beyond past debt. This imperative highlights the real condition of modern day indentured servitude. Indebtedness generates the creation of social bonds. Hardt recognized the notion of social bonds in relation to indentured servitude. We are bound to satisfy debt. Debt, then, becomes a work ethic and a regime of supervision and surveillance.

Considering this framework, Hardt recounted how various resistance movements during 2011 sought to redefine the concept of social bond. Rather than a bond to satisfy a debt the encampments, grounded territorially, *sought to develop the notion of a bond to one another*. Hardt showed how the occupy movements across the world inverted the notion of debt to stand for a relation in which we are indebted to one another absent a creditor. In their shared spaces of occupation, the movements went beyond the individualizing function of debt to a collectivization of debt held by members of the resistance. Hardt argued that the slogan of the 99% succeeds by both highlighting fundamental inequality and creating the potential for shared bonds.

Hardt closed with a few fundamental questions: How do you move from the space of the square to the entire society? (A possible answer: One would have to recognize constitutionally our debt to one another without credit and to offer real security without fear.) What would be the possibility to constitute these relations? Hardt suggested adopting a constitutional line of thought by asking: What would it take to create a constitutional move toward encoding alternatives in democracy?

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