

Radical Italian Thought and the World

Interview with Michael Hardt

edited by Federico Di Blasio and Pietro Maltese*

ABSTRACT

This interview aims to highlight the connections between Michael Hardt's political thought and Italian philosophy. From his academic training to his militant background, the conversation focuses on the American intellectual's relationship with figures such as Fredric Jameson, Toni Negri, and Paolo Virno, eventually discussing his engagement with some classics of Italian philosophical thought (notably Machiavelli and Gramsci). The result is a picture that reveals Hardt's use of Italian philosophy in the attempt to move beyond both the traditional categories of Marxism – updating them through the lens of postcolonial studies – and the limitations of philosophical nationalisms.

Michael Hardt (Rockville, 1960) is an activist, social movement theorist, political philosopher, and American literary theorist. His writings have been translated into numerous languages, thereby making him one of the most prominent and incisive voices in contemporary philosophical and political thought. He is widely known for his collaboration with Toni Negri, with whom he wrote, among other works, the *Empire* tetralogy (Harvard University Press, 2000), which concluded with *Assembly* (Oxford University Press, 2017). Hardt's intellectual interests are wide-ranging and concern primarily the thought of Gilles Deleuze, Italian operaismo, and the Marxist tradition. Among his publications are: *Gilles*

Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy (University of Minnesota Press, 1993); *Labor of Dionysus* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994), written with Toni Negri; the anthology *Radical Italian Thought* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), edited with Paolo Virno; and the aforementioned *Empire* tetralogy, consisting of *Empire*, *Multitude* (Penguin, 2004), *Commonwealth* (Harvard University Press, 2009), and *Assembly*. It is also worth recalling his most recent work, *The Subversive Seventies* (Oxford University Press, 2023), recently translated into Italian by DeriveApprodi (2025), which aims to show, beyond the rhetoric of the 'anni di piombo', the social movements of the 1970s and their impact on the formation of contemporary society,

* Università degli Studi di Palermo.

projecting the movement onto a global scale.

The interview, conducted by Federico Di Blasio and Pietro Maltese, highlights key moments in Hardt's academic and political formation, with particular attention to his relationship with Italian philosophy. Hardt discusses his experience as an activist and translator, retracing the reception of Italian political thought in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s through an examination of certain American political journals, his stay in France and his encounter with Antonio Negri, the genesis of several texts written from the 1990s to today, and finally his latest work and his relationship to the so-called Italian Thought.

Let's begin with your background. When did you first encounter Italian philosophy and thought in your studies? In what ways were these intertwined with the struggles of the 1980s and 1990s in the United States? In short, how would you describe your relationship with Italian political thought?

My introduction to Italian thought was primarily via political activity. In the mid-1980s I was involved with a migrant aid project for refugees from the wars in Central America (called the Sanctuary Movement), and with Central American politics more generally. As part of the activist movement, I eventually went to

El Salvador and made connections with the student organization at the National University. I was inspired by their revolutionary activity but I also recognized that it was very specific to their situation and did not correspond well to what could be done in the United States.

At that point I was introduced to some of the revolutionary practices in Italy in the 1970s by an issue of the journal *Semiotext(e)* titled *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*. The issue contained short theoretical and political texts by Tronti, Virno, Piperno, Bologna, Bifo, Negri, and others. It struck me that this mode of theorizing and these political practices were a much more appropriate reference for developing my political desires in the United States. That led me to start reading more broadly the major texts of Italian political thought.

In a 2011¹ interview you said that you also became interested in philosophy after reading Gramsci with activists in Mexico City while you were there. What kind of reading sessions were these? Who led them? What were you reading?

I did not participate in any organized reading groups in Mexico City. It was rather that several friends chastised me, 'you haven't read Gramsci?' I remember reading the *Modern Prince* and the section on intellectuals from the *Prison Notebooks* at the time. The friends were all from Trotskyist groups, but there seemed

to be many Trotskyist groups, all conflicting with each other. I was not in Mexico City long enough – and, perhaps, I was too young and naïve – to understand the intellectual and political landscape.

Could you tell us about your academic background? What kind of relationship did you have with Fredric Jameson?

My first degree was in engineering. I was interested in solar energy and my first real experiences in Italy were working in small factories that made photovoltaic cells.

I had thought that engineering could provide political possibilities for me but before long I became frustrated by the limitations of what engineering could offer. I went back to university, this time in a doctoral program in Comparative Literature. It was a good location for me because it allowed me to work in the kind of philosophy that was not done in US philosophy departments and the kind of political theory not done in US political science departments. I never was a student of Fredric Jameson. We only met after I finished my PhD. He was the head of department where I was given my first (and only) academic position. We quickly became friends.

You met Toni Negri during your Deleuzian apprenticeship. In what way do you think his thought-in-action influenced your political biography?

I met Toni while I was still a PhD student. I had read his books and I wanted to meet him. In order to meet him, I translated his book on Spinoza into English, and then I contacted him through a friend to say that I had some translation questions (which was true). Toni invited me to Paris for a week to talk about the translation, and it was a nice encounter. He then suggested that I should move to Paris, which I did the following year.

One reason that Toni's books appealed to me was that it seemed that he was able to bring together erudite scholarly interests with practical political engagement. That turned out to be true about Toni, and this ability to bring philosophy and politics together certainly influenced my own political biography.

*In 1995 you edited, together with Paolo Virno, an anthology dedicated to Radical Italian Thought. What political needs or imperatives lay behind that publication? Why did you believe that «Laboratory Italy refers no longer to a geographic location, but to a virtual space of hope and potential that may be actualized anywhere; better, it refers to a specific modality now available to all of us, of experimenting in revolution»²? Radical Italian Thought is also one of the founding texts of the so-called Italian Theory, according to the interpretive proposal Roberto Esposito put forward in *Pensiero vivente* (2010): how do you assess that proposal? Was Italy re-*

ally 'a difference', as Toni Negri first and Roberto Esposito later described it?

My goal for this anthology was to introduce to English language readers a group of authors that I found inspiring and, as I said, that I considered to be useful for thinking politically in the United States. Materially, the anthology emerged from an anthology that Paolo had recently published, *Sentimenti dell'aldiquà*. We started with a selection of essays from that book and then added others. Paolo was also working at the time to organize the journal «Luogo comune», which I found very important. It corresponded, in some ways, with our journal project in Paris, *Futur antérieur*. In all these ways, I felt at the time that there was a new intellectual and political project emerging between France and Italy.

As you know, so-called French theory had long been very widely known in US universities at that time. The US reception of French theory, however, seemed to me to lack a strong political component. What distinguished 'Italian Thought' for me, and what could serve as an important complement to the US version of French theory, was its political component. Most of the Italian authors I sought to introduce had significant militant experience and their philosophical work was inextricably tied to political action. In this respect, then, my view of Italian Thought has a relation to what Roberto Esposito pro-

posed but is also quite different insofar as it emphasizes the explicit political dimension.

This work of rediscovering Italian political thought in the United States had, moreover, already been undertaken by Lotringer in an issue of Semiotext(e) and by journals like Zerowork. What relationship did you have – if any – with these experiments in translation? What could the Italian 1960s and 1970s teach the United States between the late 1980s and the 1990s?

The journal «Zerowork» was very important and active especially in the 1970s. Unfortunately, in the 1970s I was in high school and not politicized. I was not aware of what was going on. Only in the mid-1980s did I become aware of Zerowork and begin to meet some of the protagonists. First, I learned of the Semiotext(e) volume, as I said, that opened up for me a whole series of connections.

In that same year you also published an important article on the concept of civil society. There, while reflecting on the problem of transition, you came to propose an opposition between Gramsci and Foucault. Could you explain more clearly what the concerns or motivations were behind your reflection on the concept of civil society?

The concept of civil society was to be the theme of my doctoral thesis in France. When I moved to Paris and obtained my *carte de séjour*, I learned that, as a US citizen, I was not allowed to work legally – unless I was a student, and then I could work legally for 20 hours a week. I thus enrolled in the doctoral program in Political Science at Paris 8 / St Denis. My advisor was Jean-Marie Vincent, who, together with Toni, had founded *Futur antérieur*. I was still writing my thesis for the US PhD in Comparative Literature (on Deleuze) while I began to write the French thesis.

I was, in part, as you say, interested in the relation between Gramsci and Foucault. The hinge between them for at the time was Althusser's ideology essay. I was intrigued by the few mentions of Gramsci by Althusser in that essay, and I also was working on the relation between the role of institutions in the production of subjectivity in Althusser's ideological state apparatuses and corresponding processes in Foucault's disciplinary society.

One other aspect of the project: I had studied Gramsci outside of the Italian context, and I was a little puzzled by the reactions of my Italian friends and by the Italian literature on Gramsci. It seemed to me, but I never studied this enough to have a solid view on the matter, that the hagiography of Gramsci by the PCI constituted an obstacle for those who opposed the PCI to study Gramsci in

depth and make original interpretations. Gramsci studies seemed, effectively, a partisan activity at the time, especially at a time when the PCI had so severely attacked the extra-parliamentary and revolutionary left.

Unfortunately, once I was given an academic position in the United States, I did not complete the French dissertation and I have never taken up the project again.

In Labor of Dionysus you decided to republish in English a series of writings that had appeared in La forma Stato nearly twenty years earlier. It seems to us that these reflections – which involve Gramsci yet not exclusively him – can be described as productive anachronisms. Could you explain the working method behind these collaborations with Toni Negri?

This book had a strange beginning. During the first years I was in Paris, an editor at the University of Minnesota Press requested that I ask Toni to put together a collection of his writings on the state for a book in English. Toni said he thought that putting together those essays from the 1970s would be boring, and he suggested that he and I write together some new chapters to complement the old essays and update the theory of the state for the current conjuncture. I must admit that I was at first hesitant to write together because I recognized clearly the chasm between me and Toni in terms

of knowledge and experience, but from the beginning, with great generosity, he treated me as an equal. That was our first experience writing together.

In his autobiography, Toni Negri describes Empire as «a thoroughly workerist book (and therefore an Italian one)»³. In what does the operaismo of Empire and of all your subsequent work consist?

I do remember that, when we were near to completing a draft of the book, we said to each other that the book pulled together the different strands of *operaismo* and updated them for the current world. I think that is true.

But here is another way of saying, more or less, the same thing. One of the *parola d'ordine* that guided us when writing the book was that resistance is prior to power. Deleuze writes this in a footnote in his book on Foucault. Most people misunderstand Foucault's notion of resistance, he insists, by thinking that it must be a reaction to power, but, instead, resistance is prior. We interpreted Deleuze's claim as being perfectly corresponding to Tronti's famous statement in *Operai e capitale* that the struggles of the working class precede and prefigure the development of capital. And we interpreted this as also in line the Ranajit Guha's notion that the history of subaltern colonized subjects and their rebellions have priority over the history written by the colonizers.

So, given these correspondences, I would say, yes, it is a profoundly operaista book, but one that treats *operaismo* in relation to a wide web of other theoretical experiences in other parts of the world aimed toward liberation.

Among the issues addressed in Empire, the link between people and nation seems to us particularly significant. The reference to Asor Rosa's Scrittori e popolo is therefore not incidental. To what extent did you draw on the analysis of this famous 1965 book to speak about contemporary reality?

I understand the connection you are making, but I do not think Asor Rosa's book was a strong reference point for us in this argument. I had read the book and Toni, of course, knew it well, so perhaps Asor Rosa was in the background. For me, at least, however, his book was not central when writing Empire.

In Assembly, it seems to us that one can identify a productive relationship with Machiavelli and Gramsci. Between the Machiavellian centaur and the becoming-Prince of the multitude, after a trajectory in which especially the latter seemed to be an author to be selectively recovered, he now appears to be a central node in the reflections of both you and Toni Negri.

For a long time, while we were writing the book, our working title was

‘Principe’. We often repeated the slogan, the becoming-prince of the multitude, which served for us as a kind of summary of this process. And you are right that Machiavelli and Gramsci were necessarily central in our thinking since our primary theme was organization and leadership. I should point out, of course, that in a variety of ways we were trying to invert Machiavelli and especially Gramsci, since we were seeking a form of organization that presents an alternative to the traditional party structure. One of our propositions, for example, was that instead of leadership being responsible for general strategy and the people or the unions entrusted with tactical decisions, the multitude is capable today of strategic guidance and leadership should be restricted to limited tactics.

Finally, let us discuss your latest book on the subversive 1970s. In this work as well, you return to the political history of Italy in the 1970s, once again using the term ‘laboratory’. Among the experiences you discuss, you naturally refer to workerist autonomy and, in your view, to the necessity of recovering the power of this vision. Could we explore this connection further?

My approach to all of the revolutionary movements of the 1970s that I engaged in the book, and this is certainly true of *autonomia operaia* too, is that we should not try to repeat what they did as

if they had discovered the solution. Instead, we should look to them because they clearly identified a political problem that we still face. I find useful Althusser’s proposition that the true vocation of philosophy is to identify real problems.

In the case of *autonomia*, one problem involved the need to discover an adequate organizational form in a period when the centrality of the industrial working class is over. The industrial working class could no longer be given the task of representing or leading the other projects of liberation. There needed to be instead some form of network whereby various movements – feminist liberation, gay liberation, students, the unemployed, and others – could articulate together and act politically. *Autonomia* was not able in the 1970s to solve this problem and to develop such a wide network of articulations for a variety of reasons – the most important of which was probably the extreme forces of repression. But, as I said, the political problem they identified remains central for us today.

Regarding the present times, it seems to us that among the categories of Italian political thought, that of passive revolution is one of the most frequently used in your work. Do you believe it is possible to recover other elements from the cultural, philosophical, and political heritage of Italian thought as well?

Yes, of course, there is an enormous amount that Italian thought has to offer us today. But I wonder if the moment is past when it was useful to think these philosophical traditions in national terms. On the one hand, what we considered distinctive of Italian thought 20 or 30 years ago has now spread all over

the world. And, conversely, I know many brilliant young Italian philosophers who have studied primarily in France, Germany, the UK, the US, and elsewhere, and thus it no longer makes sense to view their work merely as Italian thought. Perhaps it is time to retire our labels for both French theory and Italian thought.

_ Note

1 _ C. CATANESE, K. WISSA, *Interview with Michael Hardt*, «The white review», settembre 2011, disponibile su <https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-michael-hardt-2/> (ultima consultazione: 9/09/2025).

2 _ M. HARDT, *Introduction: Laboratory Italy*, in P. VIRNO, M. HARDT (a cura di), *Radical Thought in Italy. A potential politics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London 1995, p. 9.

3 _ T. NEGRI, *Da Genova a Domani. Storia di un comunista*, Ponte alle Grazie, Milano 2020, p. 68.