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The multitude beyond measure: Building a common stupor

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ABSTRACT

In response to contagion, competing and contradictory movements emerge that engender openness to new modes of life and reactionary defenses of old ones, that acknowledge mutual dependency and vulnerability and that heighten the policing and surveillance of borders. Through reading the Empire project, this article articulates these as struggles over measure that unfold on the terrain of sovereignty and biopolitical economy. We show that the passage from modern to imperial sovereignty hinges on the former's inability to adequately impose calculatory regimes, to which the latter's flexibility and fluidity responds. This accompanies the passage from industrial to biopolitical command, from regulation through the wage to rearticulation through extractivism. Having articulated the contemporary coordinates within which the multitude finds itself, we then propose an educational weapon for the struggle against sovereignty and capital: stupidity. Turning to Jean-François Lyotard, we demonstrate just how fundamentally the rule of Empire depends on the outside of measure for its continual reproduction, and how Empire frames the communicative networks of biopolitical labor, a framing from which Hardt and Negri haven't adequately broken. As the other of thought, as that which can't be articulated, commanded, or absorbed by capital, stupidity remains totally useless and unproductive for Empire, which is exactly where its potency lies for the multitude. By critically engaging stupidity, we can refrain from reducing the pandemic to a need for heightened immunity and enclosure achieved through articulation.

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Introduction

As with every period of interregnum, the novel coronavirus pandemic continues to radically throw dominant systems and discourses into crisis and sharp relief, pushing them to their brink while forcing them to the foreground, and ultimately revealing the contingency and indeterminacy of our conception and enactment of subjectivity and the social across scales. In response to contagion, competing and contradictory movements emerge that engender openness to new modes of life and reactionary defenses of old ones, that acknowledge mutual dependency and vulnerability and that heighten the policing and surveillance of borders.

In some ways, this isn't a particularly new situation. The more general struggle between capital and labor is always one between, on the one side, the vitality of solidarity and resistance and, on the other side, and the enervation of power and division. Different regimes of capitalist

production and sovereignty can be defined by the changing coordinates of and attempts to manage this struggle. As each regime consolidates, the context of the contradiction shifts, and new constraints and possibilities emerge. One of the valences of this general struggle concerns the concept and ontology of the immeasurable, which is an existential threat to capital, as capital requires calculation and measurement not only for its own metrics, but for society as a whole. In this sense, the entire struggle of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* project turns on the status and potential of the immeasurable, and in particular on the passage from the *outside* of measure to the *beyond* of measure. Measure's outside is that which can't actually be calculated at the global level, the actually existing excess of productive capacity. It could *theoretically* be measured, however. Measure's *beyond* "refers to the vitality of the productive context, the expression of labor as desire, and its capacities to constitute the biopolitical fabric of Empire from below" (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 357). The beyond of measure is "*the new place in the non-place*, the place defined by the productive activity that is autonomous from any external regime of measure" (p. 357).

In what follows, we read the *Empire* project through the lens of this struggle as it unfolds on the terrain of sovereignty and biopolitical economy. We show that the passage from modern to imperial sovereignty hinges on the former's inability to adequately impose calculatory regimes, to which the latter's flexibility and fluidity responds. This accompanies the passage from industrial to biopolitical command, from regulation through the wage to re-arbitration through extractivism. Having articulated the contemporary coordinates within which the multitude finds itself, we then propose an educational weapon for the struggle against sovereignty and capital: stupidity. Turning to Jean-François Lyotard, we demonstrate just how fundamentally the rule of Empire depends on the *outside* of measure for its continual reproduction, and how Empire frames the communicative networks of biopolitical labor, a framing from which Hardt and Negri haven't adequately broken. As the other of thought, as that which can't be articulated, commanded, or absorbed by capital, stupidity remains totally useless and unproductive for Empire, which is exactly where its potency lies for the multitude.

What surfaces is not an indiscriminate embrace of stupor or the unknown, but a critical approach to stupidity as a weapon and a value for a new world. It would be particularly absurd to pursue the former during a time in which the race to identify, express, and render visible the particulars of the novel coronavirus that would help slow or stop its spread and facilitate treatments are absolutely crucial. It would be dangerous, however, to reduce the pandemic and the virus as *only* phenomena that must be made knowable and measurable, for doing so would precisely miss the potential of the moment. The age of Empire, Hardt and Negri (2000) write, is "the age of universal contagion" (p. 136). The response must not return to a generalized fantasy of immunity and enclosure achieved through articulation.

The modern political and economic order of measure

Hardt and Negri (2000) present the birth and life of European modernity as an imposed arbitration between immanence and domination through the construction of the sovereignty of the nation-state. On the side of immanence was the liberation of thought and knowledge from the Church and God to the materiality of the world. Throughout the period "stretching from the thirteen to the sixteenth centuries... the powers of creation that had previously been consigned exclusively to the heavens are now brought down to earth" (p. 73). In philosophy and politics, literature and science, the basis and ends of knowledge moved from spirit to matter. Yet this revolutionary transformation threatened not only to overturn premodern sovereignty, but sovereignty in general. As such, it sparked a reactionary movement to reassert transcendence. The simple reassertion of the Church's authority was impossible under the new landscape produced through the revolution in immanence, however, and so transcendence emerged from

within the new social relations of the material world. The schema of representation allows for the containment of the immeasurable powers of immanent desire as it “functions to legitimate this sovereign power” while at the same time it “alienates it completely from the multitude of subjects” (p. 84).

The dialectic of the state and the people temporarily imposes a disciplinary order that is able to contain the multitude in the political order and inaugurate the regime of industrial capitalist production in economic rule. It’s the latter that legitimates the former: the constituted transcendence of the nation-state is the rule of private property, which allows for the articulation between the most expansive and intimate scales of the social, economic, and political. “Private property,” as they write in *Commonwealth*, “produces a relation of exploitation in its fullest sense—the production of the human as commodity” (2009, p. 23), which is possible through the reduction of singularity into identity, from the multitude to the people and the individual. The private requires the knowledge of a border, a content, a value; it’s only when these are known that they can enter into exchange. Capital is the production of surplus value, and in modern, industrial capitalism value “depended on the ability to discipline labor and measure its efforts, the very material efforts of thousands of workers and the harshness of organized command in manufacture” (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 312). Even the body’s ability to labor must be conceptualized as the property of that laborer, or else the capital-labor contract is null and void. Capitalism is, on this reading, the epistemological and ontological war against immanence through the imposition of measure. The categories of modern capital—raw and auxiliary materials, means of production, and labor-power—each need some form of measure and calculation, and so all of the earth, its inhabitants, and their creations are translated into numbers on balance sheets. These translations, in turn, work recursively to produce subjectivities that feel, experience, and understand themselves and the world through these measured forms (see Ford, 2013). The reduction of singularity to identity, of the multitude to the people, is thus a praxis of economic and ideological production united by the requirement to calculate measure. The wage, for example, is both an economic and ideological matrix that renders life and labor through the technological (clock) measurement of time.

Taken together, the sovereignty of the nation-state and the rule of private property comprise the general order of modernity. This particular order, of course, was never totally stable. It nonetheless altered the coordinates of the struggle between immanence and transcendence. At the same time, the struggles within and beyond modernity reacted back on these coordinates. The great socialist and national liberation movements of the 20th century, for example, were emancipatory as they sought new spaces and identities for the colonized and exploited, but this emancipatory thrust was blunted by the inability to escape the dialectics of modern sovereignty: liberation only seemed possible through the nation. In other words, the immeasurability of the colonized and exploited was captured through the formation of new nation-states that took their place within the imperialist world order. Yet as they took their place, they interrupted the functioning of that world order, as these struggles “took away the possibility of the old imperialist strategy of transferring the crisis from the metropolitan terrain to its subordinate territories” (2000, p. 263). Meanwhile, these proletarian struggles also manifested in the dominant countries in the US, Europe, and Japan, which won significant social and economic reforms but pushed these contradictions even further. At the height of these struggles, therefore, the world order’s juridical and economic pillars are thrown into crisis: the regime of capitalist accumulation within and between nation-states and the international system of institutions and mechanisms for facilitating that accumulation and managing the attendant contradictions lost their footing.

In response, Hardt and Negri (2000) identify two options open to capital: repression and recomposition. Capital could—and did—unleash the repressive apparatus of the state on labor and social movements in this period, not only through counter-intelligence programs that included assassinations and arrests of leading figures and infiltration and disinformation campaigns, but also through technological restructuring and automation. This path alone, however,

was insufficient in that it remained fundamentally within the old disciplinary paradigm. In other words, it depended on the configuration of modern sovereignty and capital. To move forward from the crisis, capital needed to *absorb* these struggles into its very functioning through “*changing the very composition of the proletariat*, and thus integrating, dominating, and profiting from its new practices and forms” (p. 268). The very values and aspirations of social movements—the rejection of factory life and the regimentation of the social, the valorization of knowledge and cooperation—became the new productive motors of capital: “On the one hand, capitalist relations were expanding to subsume all aspects of social production and reproduction, the entire realm of life; and on the other hand, cultural relations were redefining production processes and economic structures of value” (p. 275). The movements rejected work in favor of life and atomization in favor of cooperation and communication, and so capital moved accordingly.

Empire, finance, and the rearbitration of measure

A fundamental benefit of the modern resolution to the struggle between immanence and transcendence for capital was its relative fixity and stability. The modern institutions that sprung up—from the family and the school to the trade union and the mainstream media—persevered through massive internal struggles and parceled up subjectivity into discrete moments and parts. They were each “like the standardized machine parts produced in the mass factory ... Each part played a specific role in the assembled machine, but it was standardized, produced en masse, and thus replaceable with any part of its time” (p. 331). This correspondence between institutions and the requirement for capital accumulation was also a fundamental problem for capital. For one, they were obviously unable to contain the immanent desire of the multitude forever. For two, because capital isn’t just *value* but *value in motion*, these institutions were too static to accommodate future accumulation. The social struggles that culminated in the 1960s–1970s thus provided the template for capital’s recomposition of the working class and its reassertion of command at the global level: biopolitical production and empire. These are postmodern forms not of *containing* but of *negotiating* immeasurable immanence. To put it differently, whereas modernity was an *arbitrated settlement*, postmodernity is a *constant rearbitration*; whereas modernity attempted to *foreclose* or *reduce* the immeasurable, postmodernity attempts to *manage* it. This is precisely why Empire represents a new period and form of rule, rather than an exceptional state in between periods and forms. In this section, we back this up by reading the examples of finance (which manages the immeasurability of biopolitical labor) and empire (which manages the immeasurability of the global multitude).

After the 1970s, the hegemonic form of production under capitalism shifted from industry to the biopolitical, from the factory to society. Biopolitical production includes immaterial forms of labor such as cognitive and affective labor, or the production of knowledges, forms of life, and ways of relating and feeling. That these are biopolitical means that it “creates not only material goods but also relationships and ultimately social life itself” (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 109). Yet production isn’t just defined by its products, but by its process. Industrial capitalism wasn’t defined by the fact that it produced steel or aluminum, but by the internal technical and organic organization of the proletariat and the production process. In biopolitical capitalism, however, this distinction blurs as process and product become indistinguishable. Not only are information, cooperation, and relationships produced, but they are also the means of producing. Because production and product are social relations, they are necessarily common and shared. It becomes difficult to draw up the balance sheet of biopolitical production, when inputs are also outputs. Even further destabilizing is the ultimate *opacity* of the production process: how do we draw the lines around the producing subject(s), the raw materials, and the means of production? Who is the originator of an idea, and where does it begin and where does it end? With biopolitical

production, the immeasurability of immanence becomes labor-power, raw material, and means of production.

Finance is the hegemonic form of capital that is able to accommodate this immeasurability. It does so not so much through organization but through extraction, by constantly enclosing, opening, and re-enclosing. We can only grasp finance's mechanisms by breaking with the separation common in some Marxist thought between finance industry, or the "virtual" economy from the "real" economy. The distinction between the two "is that production and, specifically, productive cooperation now tend to be organized outside capital's direct engagement" (Hardt & Negri, 2017, p. 164). How, then, does finance accomplish its feat? A key role here is played by derivatives, which "form a complex web of conversions among a wide range of forms of wealth" (p. 165), which are transparent and opaque, past and future, local and global, and identitarian and singular:

Derivatives and the derivative markets thus operate a continual process of calculation and establish commensurability, making an extraordinary wide range of existing and future assets measurable against one another in the market... The values of social production today may be unknown, immeasurable, and unquantifiable, but financial markets nonetheless manage to stamp quantities on them, quantities that are in some sense arbitrary but still quite real and effective. (165)

Another key here is debt, which allows capital to measure and stake a claim on unknown and even unknowable future social production as it manifests across different levels of the social, from the individual up to nation-states and inter- and supra-national sovereign bodies and networks.

These inter- and supra-national networks—consolidated through empire—allow for the constant deterritorialization that the immeasurability of immanence produces through the global movements of the multitude. Sovereignty within empire is no longer only within the fixed apparatuses of nation-states and instead shifts and unfolds in different places at different times. This is made most explicit when Hardt and Negri identify *ether* as one of empire's operations of control: "The management of communication, the structuring of the education system, and the regulation of culture appear today more than ever as sovereign prerogatives. All of this, however, dissolves in the ether" (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 346). Communication is a deterritorializing process that "attacks the very possibility of linking an order to a space. It imposes a continuous and complete circulation of signs" (p. 347). Empire is a form of rule that itself decomposes and recomposes in different instances. It sometimes allows for migrations that betray its borders (decomposition) but later reinforces those borders or erecting new ones (recomposition). In this way, it constantly negotiates with the immeasurable plane of immanence.

The resources for management capital finds in finance and ether don't really attenuate for the possibility of crisis. On the contrary, they seem to accelerate it, spreading the possibilities for resistance and revolt throughout the web of society. This doesn't mean, of course, that collapse is in any way inevitable or imminent. The construction of the multitude and the common remains a political project, one that entails organization, force, and orientation.

Common stupidity

Marx's concept of the general intellect is crucial to understanding biopolitical production and resistance. The general intellect, Hardt and Negri (2000) write, "is a collective, social intelligence created by accumulated knowledges, techniques, and know-how" (p. 364). Marx anticipated that, as capital developed, the general intellect would become increasingly important. He even suggested—albeit in a somewhat fleeting manner—that this collective, socialized intelligence would get the upper-hand in value production, undermining both actual labor and labor time as the source of value. "What Marx saw as the future is our era," they write, as "the incorporation of science, communication, and language into productive force have redefined the entire

phenomenology of labor and the entire world horizon of production" (p. 364). They insist, however, that the general intellect includes not just information and knowledge, but all forms and manifestations of immaterial labor, which are all bodily and intellectual.

In Marx's time, this knowledge was incorporated in machinery to increase production. But now knowledge *itself* is valuable. This presents a paradox for capital: "the more it is forced to pursue valorization through knowledge production, the more that knowledge escapes its control" (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 268). Such is the paradox of the global socialization of production, whereby capital becomes external to the production process and can only work backwards to enclose and corrupt the common by turning it into private property through extractivism. The immateriality of knowledge makes it difficult to privatize and enclose. Moreover, such privatization in fact hinders future productivity. The general intellect thus represents a constant site of contestation between capital and labor, and the struggle of the multitude entails the defense and expansion of the general intellect against capital's privatization efforts. It is here, in the drama of this struggle, that we would like to offer stupidity as an ontological weapon of the multitude.

If resistance is always prior to power, and action to reaction, then the immeasurable is prior to measure. Calculation works to eliminate or cast off the outside of measure, trimming the edges as it were. But that which is truly *beyond measure* resists calculation irreducibly. Stupidity is such a state of being beyond measurement, one that totally resists all attempts at measurement by finance and empire. By claiming the power of stupidity and encouraging experiences in stupor, we can work to produce forms of subjectivity that are antagonistic to the neoliberal regime, forms that are open to the unexpected and unforeseeable that is the revolutionary rupture required for passage beyond empire. In the "*battle over the production of subjectivity*," that "asymmetrical combat between the capitalist technologies of measure and the immeasurable, overflowing forces of enlarged social production and reproduction" (Hardt & Negri, 2017, p. 223), stupidity becomes an important defensive and offensive reserve of defection. To make this argument, we turn to a philosopher who, although he's mentioned briefly, is unfortunately otherwise omitted from the *Empire* series: Jean-François Lyotard.

In a short fable, "The Intimacy of Terror," written toward the end of his life, Lyotard (1997) provides a succinct and largely compatible critique of what Hardt and Negri call empire and, more importantly, theorizes that which is necessary to resist it. He begins with a brief summation of what he sees as "the system:" a shifting, evolving, and flexible network whose internal functioning "is not subject to radical upheaval, only to revision" (p. 199). In fact, Lyotard's system *actively solicits* and *demand*s such revisions. As a postmodern system, its "politics are managerial strategies, its wars, police actions. The latter do not have the aim of delegitimizing the adversary but of constraining it, according to the rules, to negotiate its integration into the system" (p. 200). One thing Lyotard shows, which bolsters our understanding of empire, is why empire needs the outside of measure. He writes that "the system favors this uncertainty since it is not closed" (p. 203). This uncertainty is the outside of knowledge—that which is not known but could be known; that which is outside of measure but is *measurable*.

Excess and surplus aren't inherently obstacles for capital to overcome. They can instead be figured as internal drives for capital's endless expansion insofar as they are potentially knowable and measurable. Lyotard is affirming capital's ability to continually decompose and recompose, its ultimate openness to difference and opposition. The intellectual, then, not only can write all manner of critiques of the system; they're *compelled* to, rewarded for it—so long as they remain within the uncertainty granted by the system: "whatever our intervention, we know before speaking or acting that it will be taken into account by the system as a possible contribution to its perfection" (p. 204). This represents a serious problem for thought and knowledge, as it reduces both to concrete articulations, or the sum total of possible concrete articulations. This is thought and knowledge as exchange value and use value. What's sacrificed, in other words, is the intractable stupidity of thought, the other of knowledge, that which is without exchange value and use value. This leads Lyotard to state his own stupor, as he thinks about the stupidity

that constitutes thought: “Whether their material was language, timbre, or color, wasn’t there some solitude, some retreat, some excess beyond all possible discourse, the silence of some terror, in the works of thought?” (p. 206). The importance of such stupidity—that which resists and exceeds articulation—is that it short-circuits the system: “Our world (the system) is but the extension to language of the routine of exchange: interlocution, interactivity, transparency, and debate, words are exchanged for words as use value is exchanged for use value” (p. 209). Stupidity can’t be articulated or exchanged.

Lyotard offers a clarification to the relationship between biopolitical or immaterial production and the rule of empire that is based on that production. In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri (2000) identify three components of immaterial labor: “the communicative labor of industrial production that has newly become linked in informational networks, the interactive labor of symbolic analysis and problem solving, and the labor of the production and manipulation of affects” (p. 30). These serve as the foundation for empire, providing not only the value that capital captures but also the networks through which imperial command circulates. As Hardt and Negri repeat throughout the series, this is a highly unstable situation that capital is unable to totally control or organize. The multitude that produces and is produced through this communicative labor, grounds its politics in this instability, wresting control away from capital. Yet Lyotard shows that this communicative labor and the networks it produces are in many ways *framed* by capital. Knowledge is valued insofar as it can be articulated, cohered, and expressed. Stupidity, as the other of thought, is sacrificed for the benefit of capital.

At this point, we should flesh out what exactly we mean by stupidity. This is no easy task, as stupidity is that which resists articulation! Nonetheless, we can approximate the realm of stupor by indicating its difference from arrogance and ignorance. Arrogance is a *refusal* to know and communicate. The arrogant subject is one who is aware that there are differences of opinion out there, other interlocutors who want to contribute to the dialogue, contrasting or invalidating proofs and information. The arrogant just doesn’t engage any of this. Donald Trump is probably the most readily example here. Everything and everyone that disagrees is simply irrelevant and cast off. Trump’s “fake news” quip (which he actually got from the Democratic Party) is a rhetorical move that accomplishes this dismissal. The arrogant one always knows, and knows best. Even if there is no grounds for legitimation, arrogance *always has an answer*. Ignorance, on the other hand, is defined by the potential to answer. The ignorant subject doesn’t have knowledge but is *capable* of having it. Through learning, ignorance can progress to competence or mastery; the ignorant have the potential for smarts, the ability to enter into the common intellect and even contribute to it. Ignorance *might yet have an answer*.

Stupidity, by contrast, *never has an answer*. When we’re in a state of stupor, we’re not even sure what the reference points for any discussion are. Stupidity is a state of pure indeterminacy. As Lyotard intimates, this doesn’t mean that stupidity is the absence of thought. On the contrary, stupidity is a kind of thinking in itself that’s *other* to thought, a chronically disobedient incapacity to actualize and articulate, one that’s divorced from concrete knowledges. Stupid thinking is the state in which “the mind isn’t ‘directed’ but suspended... It is thought itself resolving to be irresolute, deciding to be patient, wanting not to want, wanting, precisely, not to produce a meaning in place of what *must* be signified” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 19). Because stupidity is a *resolution* to be irresolute, it isn’t a passive state but one that requires exposure and experience, a training of sorts. Neoliberal thinking is determined solely by producing meaning and signification, and neoliberal subjectivity is organized around the compulsion to articulate and communicate—to produce knowledges, ideas, affects. In each instance, subjectivity is reduced to identity, and the outside of measure is brought within. Uncertainty on this model is only valued insofar as it can generate certainty. That the resulting certainty is later undermined and subjected to another round of uncertainty is all the better, as derivatives and debt can lay claim to the future value generated.

Stupidity is a permanent uncertainty, and therefore useless to finance capital. As a permanent unproductivity, no form of extractivism can enclose stupor. Take student debt, for example. A

claim on future value, debt traps students in the circuits of exchange. During school, debt determines what classes a student should take, what course of study they should follow, how they should or can spend their time. Even the school itself has to justify its existence to consumers, banks, and the state according to future employability. Even those courses, majors, or schools that aren't linearly "market-ready" are framed through their usefulness to capital. As Hardt and Negri show us, capital has an expansive capacity to redefine use and value. For biopolitical command, what matters is not so much *what* is produced but *that* something is produced. Thus, when the debt comes due after graduation, the subject isn't only entrapped in exchange networks through career "choices," but more fundamentally through the imperative to produce, articulate, and signify.

What lies behind debt and the other varied forms of extraction are "the wealth of social relationships, social intelligence, and social production" (Hardt & Negri, 2017, p. 169). The task of the multitude is, then, to wrest this common from the control of capital. Yet as long as we remain subjects compelled to articulate, to know, to make sense, we open the common up to capture. It is precisely for this reason that we need to build a common of stupidity to act as a bulwark against extraction. Stupidity, however, is a weapon and value for the multitude in this struggle, one that is a necessary—if heterogeneous—supplement to the production of common knowledges, ideas, affects, and so on. The multitude's task in this regard is not only to articulate and signify, but also to produce a common stupidity, an expansive network of relations that remain resolutely indeterminate and opaque. By doing so, the age of universal contagion can produce new and open modes of health and life that operate in the interests of justice, liberation, and vitality.

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