

# Michael Hardt on the Politics of Love

Interview by Johan Grimonprez

[excerpts]

2014

Johan Grimonprez:

The state of constant war becomes a permanent social relation, an ontology reinscribing itself in all aspects of social life. It not only blurs the distinctions between the military, the police and the justice institutions – but it corrupts even everyday life: what we eat, consume, learn and talk about. Simply put, we have become consumers of fear, an ontology of fear.

Michael Hardt:

It's a long-term modern philosophical, political notion that fear is a reliable ruling power. Machiavelli is posing two alternatives for the Prince. One is that people follow him because he is feared and the other is that people follow him because he is loved. His conclusion is because the locus of fear, the source of fear resides in him (in the prince) and it can be constant for his rule. Whereas the locus of love resides in the people and therefore for him (the prince), it's not under his control. But by the same logic why the prince should favor fear because, the people maybe should favor love because it resides in them. It's in their power and so for them, it could be constant and long lasting. Machiavelli opens a question for which he probably doesn't provide the answer: what would it mean to have a political regime based on love?"

J.G.: You mentioned that the military-industrial complex has become a form of historical oversimplification that does not take into account the real core, and what you would call in your book *Multitude*, a system of global apartheid.

M.H.: I think it's extremely important to focus on the military industrial complex and on the arms trade and on people who were making wealth off of selling arms to all kinds of sides. All these things seem to me as extremely important, but it should be relativized in my view in a sense that it's not the only problem, perhaps that's not even the core. In other words, if we were to think 'if we could only get rid of the arms dealers, if only we could get rid of the relationship of capital to selling arms' we would end the violence. I think rather one has to recognize the much deeper continuing of violence, of which our warfare is the tip of the iceberg.

And indeed, the world system today is becoming ever more a system of global apartheid. I think that it's misleading to think about global hierarchies as simply being about walls or exclusions. Walls are often talked about and come to mind: the US/Mexican border, Israel/Palestine. These are walls that separate. I think what's more characteristic and even more insidious is the kinds of hierarchical inclusions that reinforce and mandate a kind of subordination. I think you have to understand apartheid in the ways it functioned in South Africa: as a kind of hierarchical and differentiated labor regime that is really a kind of inclusion. Slavery in the US functioned this way too. It's not just about exclusion, it's really about making the subordinations and hierarchies extremely intimate and part of every day life. The kind of continual war we face today is really on continuing with the class, and racial,

and gender, and other oppressions that have structured our societies as violent.

J.G.: Thatcher dismissed society as mere illusion when she postulated that: “there is no such thing as society.”

M.H.: It seems to me that the one aspect of the violence of contemporary society is defined by forced individualism and an assumption of no-relation, of no social relation. In some ways you could say that in the 1980's, a certain kind of white racism in Britain goes together with Margaret Thatcher saying there is no society. There is a kind of forced individualism plus the bonds of sameness that fit into these fundamentalist notions.

J.G.: International law served in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century merely to legitimate and support the violence of the strong over the weak. The inequality of power seems to make it impossible to establish equality before the law. The violence of the strong is automatically legitimated and the violence of the weak immediately labeled terrorism.

M.H.: One thing that's been made clear is that the US is no longer capable of acting unilaterally in military and political terms. I think that the collapse of the projects in Iraq and in Afghanistan already during the Bush years was a symptom of this. You have to think about the global order today like a 3 dimensional chess game. There's a top board, a military board in which you have to play on the US's terms, but you have to simultaneously play on a global order on this second level of economic aristocracies, and corporations, and dominant nation states? And then you also have to look at the third level, in terms of non-state actors, the media, etc.

I think Mr.Spock could play three-dimensional chess in *Star Trek*, but I'm not sure the rest of us can. It's a much more complex challenge than only looking at it from the top level, or from the military level, because then you're not seeing how the global order is functioning. You have to play the three levels simultaneously.

It's not a war defined by boundaries and sovereign enemies but a mixed and perpetual state of conflict. That too, it seems to me, is very intimate. It's not separated in peaceful zones and zones of conflict. In fact there has been a kind of creeping of conflict into all global spaces. In some sense we are all treated like prisoners. Characteristic of the prison was its omnipresence surveillance regime. Now throughout social sites in schools, in streets, everywhere else we are part of surveillance, but we are also asked to be the warden, or at least the guard. Like we are all supposed to watch each other: like the “see something, say something” campaign. I would say that this security regime is one facet of this state of war. Why do you take your clothes off in the airport? And why do you submit to all kinds of surveillance of your daily activities really almost everywhere? I think the only answer is fear. The constant state of war, the foundation of fear and our acceptance of a security regime and to be both objects and subjects of it, makes democracy seemingly impossible until we can somehow create a society that does not make our political decisions based primarily on fear.

J.G.: Democracy is obscured by a seemingly permanent state of war. In times of war, the constitution is suspended temporarily. But this state of exception has become permanent; the exception has become the rule, and the line between war and politics becomes increasingly blurred. Also global institutions like the United Nations and the World Bank have become corrupted, where debt serves as a legal mechanism of enslavement to keep the poor, poor and the rich, rich.

MH Global interaction on the one hand and globalization in general makes democracy a both more difficult and more pressing issue, and they should be opening a new field in which one has to reimagine democracy and what it could mean. The super national forms of rule – I am thinking about it in economic terms things like the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund - in some ways preclude what has been thought of as democracy before.

J.G.: What is democracy for you?

M.H.: Part of the difficulty of talking about democracy is how the concept has been corrupted. It is almost impossible to say the word 'democracy' because it has come to mean something extraordinarily different from what we thought it should mean. At best 'democracy' means something like a periodic election among a limited choice of wealthy politicians. In other parts of the world, when you talk about democracy, it means that you better start running because the bombs will start falling. Democracy means essentially following US foreign policy, something like that. I think there is a huge obstacle to redefining the concept. To make democracy mean what we want it to mean.

We have entered into a permanent state of war. A war without end. When one recognizes that we've entered into that state, it not only makes democracy impossible, but for many makes it undesirable. The urgency of this permanent state of war has redefined or obstructed democracy but it has also in some ways pushed it off of the agenda.

The construction of social institutions is certainly one way in which people are excluded from power or even trained to be excluded from power. It is for that reason among many others that I am interested in many movements that claim to be for the 'common'. Movements that are contesting both private control: 'the rule of private property' and public control: the rule of the state over social goods and social resources.

I think that those institutional struggles which you might cluster around this notion of the 'common'; the refusal of both privatization and state control, that these are small, institutional ways of people not just of taking more authority over their lives but also becoming the kind of people that are capable of democracy. By having the kinds of political engagements with the various aspects of society that allow us to make decisions. That is what really is required.

J.G.: Is there a definition of the commons?

M.H.: I would much prefer to think of the commons as a mosaic or a composition. Not only the differences remain, but differences are central, rather than everyone coming to an agreement. No, I think the commons has to be, should

be based on conflict, on antagonism. I think even at the basic level, something Toni Negri and I have been thinking about is how to understand the term 'institution' as something that is based on conflict and antagonisms rather than as a unified and coherent structure.

J.G.: Love is also, like democracy, a sort of unfinished project, but love would probably be defined not as one thing, but as many different conceptions. Not dissimilar to Godard's film *Alphaville* where we live in a society deprived of something essential, not even aware of what we actually miss, since we lack the stories and concepts to define it. Not dissimilar to the final scene of *Alphaville*, depicting a society where every word relating to the idea of love is banned. And this woman, in love with the protagonist, is searching to express her feelings, but she doesn't find the words, as the concept of love is foreign to her.

M.H.: Machiavelli's alternative is that either the prince should be feared or loved. And so one could ask what would it mean to have a political regime based on love. Love like democracy is certainly a corrupt political concept. It has been corrupted. My academic friends have a lot of difficulty with this love business either for its sentimental or because they think I have been hanging out too much with Italians. Whatever the problem is, its something like that. I think its met with discomfort because 'love' seems to be outside of the realm of serious discussion. Poets and psychoanalysts can talk about love but we shouldn't talk about it. I do think that there is a discomfort because of the way that it implicates us.

Most times when people talk about regimes based on hatred, they in fact are based on a certain kind of love. But its a horrible kind of love. For instance when one talks about white supremacy, or other forms of racism I would put together (nationalisms and various religious fundamentalisms), I do think they're based on love, but they're based on a notion of love in which one loves the one who is like him. Which is somewhat similar as a destruction of differences and our becoming one. Or it could mean that a kind of multiplication of differences, bonding with those who are not like you, either thinking of love as defining a 'we' that is based on a unity and sameness. Have love defining a bond. A kind of 'we' that is a multiplicity. In fact it is based on a kind of proliferation of differences. Only that would be a kind of love that could found a democratic politics.

J.G.: You touch upon the aspect of love as an ontological power.

M.H.: The reason I care about love in politics, the reason it seems important to me, is that I understand love to be the most powerful bond. The most powerful and lasting bond. It is true that we often think about it in an intimate scale but we also should think about love at a social and large scale. What are the kinds of bonds both rational and based on passions that can and do hold us together? I think that neglecting to think of those, if we think of politics as only based on interests or objective facts, or reason as if it were separated from passions, we will miss what's actually guiding our lives.

During those 18 days of Tahrir Square, of the occupation Tahrir Square in Cairo January 2011, every day in the New York Times, I'm sure in every other foreign press around the world, they were searching for the real leaders. Like one day it was El Baradei the Nobel physicist, another day it was a Google executive. Each day they were trying to figure out who's really behind this.

Like who's the single voice that's doing this. But they couldn't understand that the fascinating thing that was going on in the square was that a variety, you know, a multiplicity of diverse groups were collaborating together and acting politically in a way that was not unified. I think that's an incredibly important experiment and the kind of experiment that we've seen repeated in recent years. I wouldn't say they have all been successful but that seems to me, it's animated by a political desire for democracy, so I would call these kind of experiments in a political love.

I think that one of the magical aspects of the encampments and occupations has been that feeling of being together. Everyone who was at Zuccotti Park or Gezi Park in Istanbul or St. Paul's or any number. Or certainly in parts of El Sol in Madrid, in Barcelona at any of the encampments everyone felt a certain kind of magic and I think that magic is precisely about a kind of both a de-individualization you know, being together and an interaction with the kinds of social differences that made up all of the occupations.”

The magical experience of the encampments is that recognition of an unknown joy of being together, in the sense of Spinoza. So it's not just a matter of empathy or of common suffering but a recognition of the possibility of our greater ability to think and act about the world, in the world where recognition of that is due to each other.

I guess one has to accept that part of going down this road is to recognize how love changes society and changes us. Love is an ontological condition, an ontological power really in that sense that love changes you. When you love politically you lose yourself and are transformed into something different: the alternative that Machiavelli didn't want to take, which is to have a social order based on love of the people rather than on their fear.