

Jon Beasley-Murray  
University of British Columbia  
jon.beasley-murray@ubc.ca

Presented at the Latin American Studies Association Congress  
Chicago, May 2014

### “The Everyday Multitude”

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels famously announce that there is a “specter haunting Europe.” And in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire*, a book that Slavoj Žižek called a “*Communist Manifesto* for the twenty-first century,” we are reminded of this ghostly scene, which now, however, seems to be global: in the Americas as much as Europe, First as much as Third Worlds, “it is midnight in a night of specters,” they tell us (386). If anything, the number of ghostly apparitions have increased: not one, but many. Or at least two. On the one hand, there is the new supranational mode of political organization and sovereignty that they term “Empire.” And on the other, there is a countervailing but equally international, unbounded political subject that goes by the name of the multitude. “Both the new reign of Empire,” however, “and the new immaterial and cooperative creativity of the multitude,” Hardt and Negri tell us, “move in shadows, and nothing manages to illuminate our destiny ahead” (386). But if Empire is shadowy and mysterious, at least its traces can be fairly clearly discerned in a series of developments from the creation of the United Nations to the end of the Cold War and beyond. The multitude, by contrast, is particularly difficult to pin down. It is, if you like, the specter haunting the specter of Empire: a counter-specter of a “political subject [. . .] begin[ning] to emerge on the world scene” (411). Or as they put it in their follow-up book—entitled, precisely, *Multitude*—it is “the living alternative growing within Empire” (xiii). However much we find ourselves in the shadow of globalization and “under the cloud of war” (xviii), the multitude, they argue, is on its way. Yet in some ways, the more they argue for its actuality, the more spectral it appears: in response to the criticism “You are really just utopians!” they declare that “We have taken pains to argue that the multitude is not merely some abstract, impossible dream detached from our present reality but rather that the concrete conditions for the multitude are in the process of formation in our social world and that

the possibility of the multitude is emerging from that tendency" (*Multitude* 226-27). This, however, hardly seems to shed much light on things. It may have "concrete conditions," but the multitude remains merely a "possibility [. . .] emerging" from a tendency. It is perpetually "to come."

The multitude is culmination, with its own "telos," of a long and tortuous process that led from the "professional worker" of the nineteenth century via the "mass worker" of Fordism and Taylorism to the "social worker" of post-Fordism (*Empire* 409). The "formation of the multitude of exploited and subjugated workers" could also be read "in the history of twentieth-century revolutions" from 1917 to 1989 (394). Yet the odd thing about the multitude, which makes it appear all the more spectral, is that in a sense it has been with us all along. For it not only arises from *Empire*; it also preceded it. If anything, *Empire* is a response to the emergence of the multitude: "not the cause but the consequence of the rise of these new powers" (394). *Empire* is in some way the creation of the multitude whose "productive force [. . .] sustains" it, at the same time as that same constituent power "calls for and makes necessary its destruction" (61). In short, the multitude's spectral quality comes from the fact that it is strangely both "to come" and "always already." It is both the culmination of postmodern *Empire* and the origin (as Negri makes still clearer elsewhere, in his book *Insurgencies*) of modern sovereignty. Its effects and the conditions of its full emergence are everywhere around us. And yet the multitude itself is not here. Indeed, it is almost as though it were everywhere *but* here and now. It is both presupposition and project, source and endpoint, but it is fully visible only fleetingly, if at all, in the scattered insurgencies (from Chiapas to Seattle) that flare up and all too quickly die down or are appropriated by its imperial foe. It resists representation, yes, but at times Hardt and Negri suggest that this is because it is simply not (yet or any more) here to be represented.

The problem of the "once and future multitude" can be addressed in part by noting that Hardt and Negri are talking in two different registers. The multitude to come is often described as a "political subject," complete with something like a political program, and demands such as global citizenship and a social wage. "We need to investigate specifically," they say, "how the multitude can become a *political subject* in the context of *Empire*" (394). Or "How can the actions of the multitude become political?" as they ask a little later on (399). Then the other register in which they are writing would be more philosophical, a question of the ontological presuppositions of

the current social order. Here, the multitude would already be a subject, but of a different kind: pre-political, or the incarnation of a power that grounds but does not directly figure in the political realm. Here is surely something of the traditional distinction between a class in itself and for itself. But beyond the rather restricted notion of the political that this distinction implies--a restriction that elsewhere and in other ways Hardt and Negri consistently chafe against--they also miss a third register, which we might call anthropological. This is much more the terrain of Paulo Virno, whose *Grammar of the Multitude* investigates not only the changing experience of the workplace, but also aspects of "everyday life" such as "idle talk" and "curiosity" (88). Virno begins to outline a phenomenology of the kind of distracted attention, interested in everything and nothing, that characterizes (for instance) our contemporary experience online. Virno's is a more nuanced and ambivalent account of the multitude than Hardt and Negri's, but it remains only a sketch. It leads him to a brief examination of what he calls the "emotional tonalities" of the multitude, among which he highlights "opportunism, cynicism, social integration, inexhaustible recanting, cheerful resignation" (84). But this is only a beginning. What we need is a much fuller affective ethnography of what we could call the "everyday multitude," distinguished both from the philosophical and the (more strictly) political multitude that Hardt and Negri so consistently champion. This is the multitude as "common": not so much in the philosophical or political senses of the term, as a particular relationship to property relations (for instance) that is neither private nor public; but common as in "ordinary," ubiquitous, second nature, common or garden. It is what goes unremarked, often un-noticed. Yet it is what political theory could still learn from cultural studies, whose founding move in the work of Raymond Williams and others was to draw our attention to the hidden intricacies of the ordinary everyday.

So just as Williams began his pathbreaking essay, "Culture is Ordinary," with the story of a bus ride (from a cathedral city in Southwest England to the hilly border country of South Wales), let me illustrate all this with an anecdote of my own--a true one--that is also a tale of travel. Perhaps it can serve as an allegory or parable, a self-critical one about what we tend to miss in our search for the multitude to come. In late December 2001, just before the New Year, I happened to be in Buenos Aires for the night. Really, this was no more than an awkwardly extended change of planes: I was travelling from

New Zealand to Chile, but the connection left me with something like fifteen hours in Argentina. Rather than staying in the airport, I figured I would go into town and look for a cheap hotel. I took a taxi and ended up just off the Calle Florida, not far from the Plaza San Martín. It was a baking hot Sunday afternoon, but after dumping my bags I decided to get out and look around. Argentina had been in the news, after all, though as I had been on a family holiday in New Zealand, I had not been particularly focussed on what was happening. But there had been images of riots and disturbances, in the aftermath of which the President had resigned. There was talk of continued mobilization and unrest on the streets. My relatives had been watching the TV news more than I had, and expressed some worries about my travel plans. It'll be OK, I said. And now I was in Buenos Aires, I reckoned it was time to see what was going on. I said to myself (and later to others), only half in jest, that I was looking for the multitude.

So I wandered down the street in the direction of the main square, the Plaza de Mayo, and the presidential palace, the Casa Rosada. I felt sure that if there were demonstrations, that is where they would be found. The plaza has, after all, long been the iconic site of popular rebellion and protest, from the tumultuous demonstrations of October 17, 1945 that founded the myth of Peronism as a movement against the social order, to the regular circuits of the Mothers of the Disappeared during the military dictatorship of the 1970s and 1980s. The plaza is also, in more complex fashion, the place where the dramaturgy of the state is traditionally enacted. But to get there I first had to walk the length of Calle Florida: the traditional heart of commercial Buenos Aires, long a well-known tourist destination, a pedestrian-only thoroughfare lined with cafés and shops selling leather goods and the like, with numerous kiosks where you can buy souvenirs and postcards. Often there is tango dancing or other forms of street entertainment. This day was not noticeably different from any others--the street was busy if not crowded, with people going about their everyday life--but I was confident things would be different at the plaza. En route, the only real sign of the recent disturbances was the fact that all the major banks were boarded up, with graffiti on the hoardings that protested against "chorros" or "thieves." The protests had emerged in full vigor, after all, with the so-called "corralito," by which savers were prohibited access to their own money, which was at the same time massively devalued as the government abandoned the effort to peg the Argentine peso to the dollar. This was then detritus from the ongoing upheaval, traces if you like of the spectral multitude I was

anxiously seeking. But when I finally reached the square, there was no sign of the crowds that had smashed the bank windows and defaced their walls. Almost nobody was about. The plaza was empty.

Somewhat disappointed, after briefly roaming the streets a little more, I headed back to my hotel. I was tired after my long trans-Pacific flight, and had to be up early in the morning to get back to the airport for the next leg, to Santiago. I had a quick shower, set an alarm, and soon fell asleep. Next thing I knew, however, I was awake and looking at my watch and it seemed I had overslept. It was ten o'clock and I was going to miss my flight. Hurriedly, I dressed, gathered up my stuff and stumbled down the stairs, only to find the people at reception looking at me a little curiously. It slowly dawned on me that it was still only ten at night, rather than the following morning, and I had only been in bed for no more than a couple of hours. Feeling foolish, I took my bag back upstairs. But now I was up again, and truth be told rather hungry. I might as well go out and have something to eat. Down on the street I passed a little bodega, where the owner and a couple of other guys were glued to the television. I continued on round the corner to a nearly deserted restaurant, where I ordered some food and a beer. Again, a television was on and the waiters, hardly busy as I was almost their only customer, were huddled together, intensely watching the screen. Slowly I worked out what was going on: a press conference in which the current Argentine president, Adolfo Rodríguez Sáa, only installed the previous week, was announcing his resignation. At the same time it was also announced that the next in line to the presidency, head of the Senate Ramón Puerta, was likewise resigning. The title of Head of State then fell next to the Head of the Lower House. After watching along with the waiters for some time, shortly I paid my bill, went back to my hotel, again passing the group at the bodega still taking in the TV news. A few hours later I took my taxi to the airport and flew out of the country. In my less than twenty-four hour stay in Argentina, there had been three presidents. But (apparently) no multitude.

None of this is to say that there were not, of course, angry protests in the Plaza de Mayo, both before my visit and in the weeks and months ahead. What is sometimes called the "Argentinazo" remains a high point of the social mobilizations that led to the so-called "Left Turns": the installation of putatively left-wing governments such as those of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Néstor and Cristina Kirchner in Argentina itself. The slogan of the moment, "¡Que se vayan todos!"--"All of

them out!"--still resonates, perhaps now in new ways with the disillusionment provoked by many of those regimes, not least that of the Kirchners. Those displays of force, in Buenos Aires but also in Caracas and Cochabamba and elsewhere, transformed the region's political landscape and, briefly at least, seemed to herald the emergence of a political subject along the lines envisaged by Hardt and Negri. And traces of that subject still linger, however spectrally, in continued protests now as often as not directed against the left in power--over the past twelve months, most obviously perhaps in Brazil. Understanding those movements and affirming their constituent power is a vital aspect of our work as intellectuals and activists. There is much unfinished business in the region, and it is lazy to suggest that this merely involves defending the regimes in power however much (as in Venezuela, for example) they are equally the object of wrath from the middle class or new media oligarchs. It is not "ultraleftism" to keep alive a memory of the desires and demands incarnated at moments such as December 2001 in Argentina; it is merely fidelity to an expanded view of politics, to what Jacques Rancière would call politics as such as opposed to the reactionary policing of the bounds of what counts as the political. But by looking always for the multitude to come, we can miss the ordinary activities in which such protests are embedded, and to which the protesters consistently return.

It is in precisely the spirit of fidelity to an expanded conception of politics, as the province of the overlooked part that has no part, that we should turn to the ordinary and the everyday. The everyday multitude experiments with and suffers many different kinds of interaction, with all the various affects they incur: curiosity, but also boredom and low-level disaffection; joy but also simpler, more routine pleasures; anger but also milder forms of frustration and irritation. These interactions are interlaced, but never fully in synch, with market transactions on a street such as the Calle Florida, moments of social companionship such as shared television spectatorship, and workplace routine such as a slow shift as a waiter. Reflecting on this phenomenology of everyday life, in the tradition of cultural studies but with renewed concepts and categories (multitude for people, affect for emotion, habit for opinion, posthegemony for hegemony) helps restore a more fully materialist conception of the ways in which bodies interact both physically and (no less materially) virtually, on the street and (say) in social media. Bodies can encounter each other in surprising ways and with unexpected results, and

indeed there is always something excessive or unspeakable in such encounters. But excessiveness and recalcitrance to discourse is true equally of the regular and almost (but perhaps only almost) predictable brushes between bodies (in the airport, in a hotel) even absent ones and their missed encounters (in the plaza, on the stairs) that make up an overwhelmingly ordinary Sunday afternoon and evening, however much it may be surrounded by scenes of crisis and insurgency, or punctuated by televisual images of the toppling of a government. But to say that this is somehow not political is, I think, I mistake. Rather, a stress on the everyday enhances our sense of the composition of an emerging but also pre-existent subject in all its commonality, its quotidian small obstacles and victories that lie behind and are reinforced (and at the same time complicated and undermined) by the larger challenges and more dramatic expressions that dazzle the eyes of those with a more romantic view of the multitude.

*works cited*

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

-----. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin, 2004.

Virno, Paulo. *A Grammar of the Multitude*. Translated by Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson. New York: Semiotext(e), 2004.