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## The End of Sovereignty. Antonio Negri, translated by Ed Emery. Cambridge, Polity Press, 2022. 220 pp

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*The End of Sovereignty* is the fifth collection of writings from Antonio Negri published by Polity Press. It tracks the development of the state form in response to class struggle, the erosion of sovereignty under neoliberalism, and the rise of new forms of control that are immanent and global. Compiled from a half century of Negri's critical theoretical investigations of sovereignty and the state, this collection usefully supplements the influential work of Negri and his co-author Michael Hardt, most notably their trilogy *Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth*. The book's twelve pieces span from Negri's early reading of John Maynard Keynes as a theorist of the capitalist state to his recent treatment of Lenin as a theorist of counterpower. They include engagements with Louis Althusser, Ernesto Laclau, Roberto Esposito (Esposito's critique of Negri is also in the volume), and Norberto Bobbio. Negri's response to Bobbio's well-known charge that Marxists lack a theory of the state is especially useful as an opening to Negri's own work. Unlike reformists, Negri says, communists don't need a theory of the state. We need a theory of "how the state is to be destroyed" (55).

Negri's concepts and terminology change over the decades. The working class becomes living labor. Democracy morphs from "a played-out term with a purely obscurantist function" (42) to a descriptor for institutions of the common (132). Consistent throughout is Negri's insistence on being done with sovereignty. For him, sovereignty is nothing other than the form of our subjugation to capital.

Negri is at his best when tracking changes in this form. More than any other theorist on the contemporary Left, he has attended to the transformations in the state wrought by neoliberal globalization. But rather than illuminating a horizon where the end of sovereignty delivers on the promise of emancipation, Negri's analyses bear witness to the loss accompanying the destruction of the welfare state. Resurgent capital has been the prime mover and beneficiary of this destruction. For capital

today, late-stage capital or neoliberal capital, sovereignty is nothing other than the form of its subjugation to the state.

Negri's premise that Marxists need a theory of how the state is to be destroyed obscures capitalist interests in its destruction. His affirmation of cognitive labor and the common likewise underplays the rise of a servant economy and globally networked communicative capitalism's installation of new modes of control and expropriation. In short, Negri's attempts to conceptualize forms of struggle today highlight not the liberating destruction of the state but rather the specificity of the challenges we face as neoliberal globalization implodes. The weakness of his answers is thus our weakness: the weakness of communists trying to remain optimistic in the face of defeat and to advance in a setting where even crumbling political institutions are fortresses against change. Negri's strength should be ours as well: unending commitment to struggle, revolution, and internationalism.

### **The social factory**

One of Negri's most widely esteemed contributions is his theorization of the impact of the working class on the state form. To the Marxist periodization of advances in working class consciousness and organization with the years 1848, 1871, and 1917, Negri adds 1929. The economic crisis of 1929 was a decisive political turning point. It's when the capitalist state explicitly incorporated class struggle as an ineliminable feature of the capitalist system. As the 1929 economic crisis revealed capital to be incapable of self-regulation and as the autonomy of the working class reshaped class relations, the state was forced to step in to shore up the system. Responding to, adjusting to, calibrating, and recalibrating incomes, violence, and control became fundamental state responsibilities. The legitimacy of this new form of the state rested not in

its ability to protect individual rights but in its ability to ensure the ongoing stability of the capitalist system.

Maintaining equilibrium is no simple task: class friction can lead to disruption any place, any time. This pushes the state to intervene in the interest of capital across the social field, in the process transforming it from a bourgeois constitutional state into a planner state. Capital is social; the state is the state of social capital; and society itself is managed like a factory. In contrast to an earlier capitalism's "despotism in the factory and anarchy in society" mediated through constitutional law, the Fordist welfare state exercises despotism on behalf of capital throughout society (31). Exploitation is socialized.

The incorporation of the working class has a fundamental impact on the state. Its task, or its "legitimation matrix" (to use a concept from Albena Azmanova), changes from securing rights to managing stability.<sup>1</sup> The state might claim to be democratic, but its legitimacy is based on exploitation: control in the interest of capital accumulation. The purported democratization of capital in fact accomplishes the capitalization of democracy, with the state becoming what Marx would call "an abstract capitalist."

Negri's analysis of the state's deepening penetration into society resembles Habermas's account of the colonization of the lifeworld. The difference lies in Negri's attention to class. The transformation of the state is not simply a matter of its increased intervention in society. It's in capital becoming the state, in the state's operation as a collective capitalist that recognizes its dependence on the working class. The working class can't be eliminated. Capital requires it. But capital also fears it. As Negri draws out in his reading of Keynes, for capitalists workers are the "party of catastrophe," ever-present threats to an always uncertain and risky future.

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<sup>1</sup>Albena Azmanova, *Capitalism On Edge* (Columbia University Press, 2020).

In the Fordist era, the incorporation of the working class into the capitalist state was presented in terms of class compromise, reformism, and the common good. The reality was that capital's becoming the state opened it to "contestation and contradiction." The state responds to the precarity of capital's position, to the difficulty of securing equilibrium, with force, repression, and violence. Economic problems are immediately political. In Negri's words, "The settling of accounts with the party of catastrophe becomes a daily event" (37).

The revolutionary period of 1968 intensified the struggles around this settling of accounts. Capital responded with neoliberalism and globalization. This rebalanced power in favor of capital, paid for by the surrender of features previously reserved to sovereignty.

### **Sovereignty unraveled**

Neoliberalism undermined sovereignty (which in no way means that it eroded coercive state power). Finance capital subjected states to markets. Operating outside of the traditional structures of bourgeois representative government, the demands of investors and financiers decreased the political effectivity of law and elections. Just as the state came to function as a collective capitalist in charge of the social factory under Fordism, so does global finance subsume society and the state, reorganizing the global division of labor, appropriating profit, and extracting rent "from the production and reproduction of life and from the communication and circulation of value" (61).

Negri's response to sovereignty's erosion is that sovereignty remains the enemy. State sovereignty may have been weakened to the edge of extinction, but it's still dangerous. Continued appeals to sovereignty fail to recognize how it has unraveled under neoliberalism and globalization. They also imply that centralized decision-making and

domination are communist values. Like a badly maintained thermonuclear facility promising clean energy while concealing its own leak and cracks, even a weakened, outmoded arrangement of power can continue to harm and oppress, threaten and misdirect.

The repercussion of Negri's analysis for revolutionary politics is that seizing the state is the wrong goal. It's the wrong goal because globalization has changed what states can do, limiting their ability to exercise power. Sovereignty as transcendental command has morphed into "a dispositif of immanent and global control" (6). Seizing the state is also the wrong goal because the establishment of dominion detaches power from subjects. We need alternative conceptions of power and figures of political subjectivity. Developing these concepts—such as constituent power, multitude, and commons—has comprised the bulk of Negri's work on state theory after sovereignty.

Negri's insights into the changes in state form index crucial challenges facing the Left. They provide a theoretical frame that helps explain how, for example, SYRIZA's victory in Greece was nonetheless a form of defeat; why the election of Black mayors across the United States accompanied neoliberal increases in inequality; why South America's pink wave, Chavismo, and Bolivarian revolution come up against economic limits; why the end of colonialism and rise of new states in Africa has resulted in neocolonialism, and so on. Globalization subjects states to the demands and requirements of finance capital. Sovereignty, or what remains of it, is but a power for managing compliance with the requirements of capital. Under these conditions, winning the state can never be enough.

Negri's emphasis on the shift from transcendental command to immanent global control lets us see how neoliberal globalization is not simply an expansion of the social factory to the global level. The logic and mechanisms of control aren't exercised from above; they're exercised

across and through, unevenly and transversally. Negri pinpoints the structural obstacle sovereignty encounters under neoliberalism as the “uncertain relationship between exceptionality and precariousness” (92). Exceptionality has lost the transcendental status attributed to it by Carl Schmitt, becoming immanent in the need for daily decisions “amid the precariousness of the juridical fabric” (92). By moving to the global level, capital frees itself from state-imposed constraints. Tax rates too high? Incorporate in the Cayman Islands. Burdened by high labor costs? Build or find a factory in an enterprise zone, maybe even one that subsidizes labor costs. Worried about being sued by employees, customers, or clients? Proactively demand arbitration agreements where contractual terms take the place of state law. What might have once been recognizable as corruption has become woven into legality. In instances where an overburdened state can enforce some kind of oversight, billionaires and large corporations write off their fines and penalties as the cost of doing business.

What Negri’s insistence on being done with sovereignty makes it harder to see is the different hybridization of public and private, economy and state, brought about by globalization. Privatization unravels socialization. It dismantles the social factory, much as leveraged buyouts enable financiers to buy up companies, saddle them with the debt that funded their purchase, sell off their assets, and fire their employees (perhaps hiring them back as benefit-less temp workers and consultants). A supposition underlying my counter argument here is that neither the factory nor the social factory was simply despotic. Both point to productive relations between capital and labor, relations of exploitation within which labor, when unionized, has the leverage to exact concessions. Organized workers have some ability to shape the conditions of their exploitation, an ability “independent” contractors and workers in enterprise zones lack. The ability to extract concessions is true for the social factory as well. That

democracy was the ideological form of exploitation placed conditions and expectations on that exploitation. Sovereignty wasn't just the sovereignty of the state. In its ideological form it was sovereignty of the people – and this is the sovereignty neoliberal globalization unravels.

The theory of how the state is to be destroyed has been written by neoliberalism: cut taxes, eliminate social services, create enterprise zones, enable private law to replace public law, and encourage forms of personal and private security while concentrating the remnants of state power in the oppressive policing of working-class communities and political dissent. Intensified policing is doubly repressive: it makes opposition both more difficult and more pointless. How can we encourage people to make the sacrifices and take the risks of political action when we don't know what winning will look like (and suspect that it is just another version of defeat)?

### **The social manor**

Negri recognizes that the transformation in sovereignty is accompanied by a new prominence of violence. He associates this violence with the “re-emergence of the primitive accumulation model,” the extraction rather than the production of value (93). Finance itself functions extractively, enabling extreme concentrations of private wealth. Here Negri's analysis aligns with Robert Brenner's account of the “politically driven upward redistribution of wealth.”<sup>2</sup> It also resonates with Brett Christophers' theorization of rentier capitalism in terms of “taking not making.”<sup>3</sup> Instead of rearranging production processes and implementing technological improvements to increase productivity, what Marx referred to as real subsumption, capital accumulation takes place under conditions of formal subsumption. Non-

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<sup>2</sup>Robert Brenner, “Escalating Plunder,” *New Left Review* (May/June 2020).

<sup>3</sup>Brett Christophers, *Rentier Capitalism* (Verso, 2020).



capitalist processes produce value that capital, whether via measures of finance or governance, simply takes.

Negri associates the resurgence (or non-weakening) of full subsumption with producers' reappropriation of fixed capital in ways that let them autonomously experiment with organizing production in common. More compelling examples of resurgent full subsumption are Uber and Airbnb. Neither create new efficiencies in the provision of local transportation or lodging for travelers. Both rely on the fixed capital of earners rather than on capitalists who invest in means of production. More precisely, both turn assets acquired out of workers' consumption funds -- their cars and houses -- into means for the capital accumulation of another, the corporation. Uber's and Airbnb's apps connect service providers to service seekers, extracting a percentage of the proceeds of the transaction. As the apps have gained dominance in transportation and hospitality sectors, they have driven down wages and thrown workers out of employment. Driven by finance capital (especially in the form of private equity), this "disruption" model is not limited to transportation and lodging but extends into office space, delivery, restaurants, real estate, mental health services, and more.

Negri rightly draws out the extractive nature of capital accumulation under global financialization. But he wrongly claims that "today exploitation no longer contains a contractual model" (92). In communicative capitalism's digital networks, contracts are more pervasive than ever. Virtually every time we access online content we are asked to consent to cookies, give permission for the scraping of our data, and agree to receive ads and updates. With the increase in cashless purchasing, our daily acts of provisioning leave a trace: we can no longer remain anonymous when we buy food or a metro ticket—and we are made to consent to this. In the United States, roughly half of all workers are forced to agree to arbitration as a condition of employment. They sign contracts giving up their rights to

having potential grievances adjudicated according to law. Grievances are evaluated in terms of the contract by arbitration courts chosen by employers. Instead of universal law to which all are equally subject, we have privatized arbitration, confidentiality agreements, non-compete agreements, and separate law for rich and poor. In place of sovereign public law, we have governance through proliferating contracts, a libertarian wet dream.

Attending to the spread of private contracts helps draw out the shape of non-sovereign power under globalized neoliberalism. Alan Supiot argues that contractualization is a feature of a society of networks.<sup>4</sup> He emphasizes two shifts in the legal structure of networked society: from sovereign to suzerain power and from law to bond. As Supiot explains, “The suzerain has immediate authority over his vassals, but not his vassals’ vassals, whereas the sovereign’s power is supreme—self-positing and bearing its cause within itself—and can be exercised directly over all his subjects” (140). Supiot’s examples of contemporary suzerainty are the European Union and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Neither the EU nor its member states are sovereign. Member states are in the position of vassals. The EU has no direct authority over populations; it depends on the mediation of the member states. States similarly swear allegiance to the IMF, subjecting themselves to its requirements which they carry out. Supiot’s account of the shift from law to bond details the form taken by the contracts spreading throughout networked society. These new contracts, “which integrate one person into another’s economic activity, affect the status of the parties retroactively and oblige them to create relatively stable bonds between them” (141). Such contracts occur in domestic law, labor law, and EU law. “Corrective mechanisms” and automatic triggers overlay and subsume legislation.

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<sup>4</sup>Alan Supiot, “The public-private relation in the context of today’s refeudalization,” *Icon* 11, 1 (2013): 129-145.

Supiot's emphasis on suzerain power more acutely describes the transformation of sovereignty than does the Foucauldian (and neoliberal) terminology of governance Negri employs. The social factory has become a social manor. Nesting fiefdoms and relations of vassalage sit within flows of conflict and alliance, armed empires and private militaries, algorithmically managed service and servitude. Neoliberalism is tending toward neofeudalism.

### **Revolution or resistance**

The end of sovereignty has repercussions for political action. Negri thinks the political categories associated with the modern state should be discarded. We have no use for the nation, the people, the working class, or the party. We need to think in terms of the global, the multitude, living labor, and the enterprise. Rather than join Negri in throwing out the bathwater of modern political theory, I find it useful to juxtapose the sets of concepts. The juxtaposition lets us identify key locations of struggle, sites of contemporary antagonism.

As discussed above, globalization has fundamentally changed the character of national sovereignty. The nationalist project is a fool's errand, even as politicians may intensify it to channel popular grievance. Negri emphasizes that globalization cannot be reversed. The struggle is over its form. Given the climate catastrophe, he is surely correct. The emissions of one affect the climate of all. Climate change-generated instabilities in some countries—the floods, droughts, fires, and military conflicts that lead to mass migration—place demands on other countries to loosen their borders and accept more immigrants, as well as provide necessary aid. Admittedly, the COVID-19 pandemic and related shortages renewed interest in shorter supply chains and national and regional self-sufficiencies in some economic sectors. This is less a deglobalization (as

some on the Right would have it) than it is a push to restructure production and circulation within a system presupposed as global.

The contrast between people and multitude highlights the limits of the notion of the people. Any assertion of a people confronts the problem of belonging: who counts and how are they counted? Who is in, who is out, and who decides? The “people,” especially as figured in contemporary populisms, evokes an impossible imaginary unity whose boundaries are perpetually called into question and policed. Negri’s multitudinous pluralism counters this closed unity with radical unbounded openness. To this open multitude, he attributes constituent power. To be sure, as potentiality, constituent power is more aspirational than actual, a name for the real challenge of creating political forms capable of responding to the unraveling of sovereignty and the fact of globality. For Negri, however, constituent power suggests new forms of the political that “replace the exception of sovereign power with the excessive nature of social production and cooperation” (67). Because social production and cooperation necessarily exceed efforts to control them, he argues, they are expressive of an autonomy beyond and independent of the state. I’m not convinced. Neither the Fordist nor the post-Fordist state ever claimed or relied on complete and total control. On the contrary, continuing the promise of bourgeois liberalism, they always made an appeal to freedom part of their legitimation matrix.

The globalization that unfolded at the end of the twentieth century relied on the expansion and intensification of networked information and communication technologies. Not just production but the reproduction of social life has been absorbed into digital telecommunications. New opportunities for the extraction of value and intensification of exploitation accompany new opportunities for interpersonal connection. Labor is cognitive; production is immaterial; and social life itself becomes a source of value for capital. For *post-operaismo* thinkers such as Negri, this is the

epoch of the general intellect, the state of capitalism where knowledge, accumulated in techniques and machines, both exploits living labor and exposes the weakness of capitalist control.

As an index of changes in accumulation and technology with which any communism today must necessarily grapple, Negri's work—along with other *post-operaisti* like Paulo Verno and Matteo Pasquinelli—is indispensable. Nevertheless, the emphasis on immaterial production is misleading. It obscures the reality of ongoing factory, construction, and agricultural labor, blurring the immateriality of extractive financialized accumulation strategies with material production. Likewise, the emphasis on cognitive and immaterial labor easily slides into figures of tech workers, creative industries, and a knowledge class, as if 1990s “New Economy” ideology were given the form of Italian communist theory. Negri's affection for unconditional guaranteed income echoes the universal basic income championed by some in the tech sector, although who, or what entity, would generate, administer, and guarantee this income in Negri's version is a mystery. To me it looks a lot like a task of the state after it has eliminated private ownership (although one can imagine teams of decentralizing tech workers installing algorithms that extract portions of networked financial transactions and redistribute them via a people's PayPal).

Rather than a mobile class of knowledge workers, most labor in developed and even developing economies is in services: nurses, teachers, home health aides, retail and temp workers, cleaners, cooks, trainers, hairdressers, massage therapists, consultants, baristas, and drivers for new lords, the holders of material and immaterial assets (land and patents, server farms and stocks). Is the labor of servants, of care workers, well-conceived as “essentially cognitive” or does that miss the character of the relation between informatization/automation and service work insofar as technological development comes up against a limit where

labor costs are cheaper than innovation and ever more workers are thrown into a low-wage, ever-growing service sector?

Negri concedes that control over the “mobile cognitive workforce” will require “new, different means” (91). By the third decade of the twenty-first century, we are getting an indication of what these means entail: traceable cashless transactions; biometric scanning at security checkpoints; automatic highway tolls; cookies and contracts for every networked interaction; platforms inserted as mediators between providers and consumers, and so on. Getting control over interactions on digital networks has taken less than two decades. Personalized communications enable degrees of surveillance, subordination, and information acquisition previously unimaginable. When we have no choice but to engage via digital networks—to find a job or apartment; to pay and get paid; to drive or take public transit—we have no choice. We are already captured.

If the general intellect is the source of value creation and, as Negri argues, the struggle today is its “reappropriation by the collective worker,” how is this struggle to be fought? It sometimes seems as if Negri imagines this struggle in terms of collectives that use new technologies outside the constraints of capital, autonomously. How autonomy for those captured in communicative capitalism is possible is murky. The disconnection of the political spaces attached to declining sovereignty from the actual exercise of power suggests that freedoms of association and expression are easily tolerated by global capital. Every move is trackable, and every utterance is welcome content for voracious social media platforms. If repressive local and national governments object, no problem. The clash itself is content—and a displacement of struggle away from the fight against capitalist command. What outside can mean, especially given Negri’s account of globalization and full subsumption, is also unclear. Maybe it names a horizon, an aspiration. The “commons” frequently appears in this connection, as some kind of ground—immaterial as well as material—for a

potential future. How it might be secured against capitalist expropriation, especially when its institutions are to be non-sovereign, is difficult to conceive, another problem to be solved through struggle.

Solving it is not, according to Negri, a task of the party. In place of the party, he offers the enterprise. Negri rejects the party as an outmoded organization that sought to represent the class vanguard. The radically plural multitude of living labor has no vanguard. It can be neither represented nor led. In contrast to the party, then, the enterprise acts as a political entrepreneur. It extracts and produces “hegemony from the thousands of movements that make up the social, “ “determining their tactical articulations” and “putting them into action” (137). Negri’s idea is directly inspired by Lenin, especially Lenin’s recognition that the working class determines strategy, and the party determines tactics. Negri concedes that “the construction of the enterprise *or party* is the communists’ fundamental task today” (138, emphasis added). Whether as enterprise or party, organization is *the* primary task for communists today.

The advantage (for Negri) of “enterprise,” is its connection to productive relations and the commons. We need a new mode of production, built on cooperation and the common and alternative to the capitalist mode. As he emphasizes, “there can be no social revolution without an adequate material base to support it” (128). The establishment of community centers and practices of mutual aid as prominent leftwing tactics in late neoliberalism suggests a nascent version of this insight. Even as they remain organizations for economic redistribution, we can recognize them as producing social relations, as institutions for social reproduction. When juxtaposed to the party, “enterprise” indexes the material problem radical political parties can’t avoid: organizing has costs of time and money. In a capitalist system, this works to the advantage of capitalists. Workers must earn enough to provide for their subsistence. Our ability to volunteer and donate isn’t endless. We may try to devote our

energies to common production, but this production can't protect itself from the extractive mechanisms of finance capital. The struggle to break free from these mechanisms can only be a struggle that breaks them, a political struggle with its own demands for time and energy. "Enterprise" isn't a form that resolves the problem around organization's material conditions and demands. At best, it's a term that identifies the problem. At worst, "enterprise" is a bit of neoliberal branding that conceals the ongoing importance of the state for communists.

## **Conclusion**

Over the past decade, popular struggles have gained strength and visibility. They've included the movement of the squares, the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, movements against austerity, movements against racism and aggressive policing, the antiwar movement, and struggles around climate change. They've also included movements against masking and vaccines during the COVID pandemic, movements against abortion and "gender ideology," movements against fuel taxes, and movements against immigration. These struggles are never merely national. Their participants and ideologies travel internationally, learning from and intensifying each other. Communists see that the movements must be against capital, against global finance and the rule of the banks, against private property and landlords, against the emerging neofeudal disorder of new lords and serfs. But we see through a glass darkly, searching for shapes of what we might create and might become. Negri doesn't quite illuminate these shapes; he shows us where to look.