

'Empire' and Minjung

- There is no Place for Empire!

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Since the book *Empire*, written by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, was translated and published², heated discussions have exploded among human- and social scientists in Korea. In the meeting concerned with this vital issue, held by the Marx Commune in September 2004, debates were focused on the question of whether we live in the times of a reinforced imperialism or in the phase of a global empire. If the first viewpoint were right, the Minjung movement must have a form of struggle against imperialism in local, territorial and national dimensions. But if people accepted the second perspective, they could not but begin with the preposition that the domination of empire would be realized by the 'discipline' and 'control' of the masses in a global scale, and the Minjung movement would be oriented to an implosion of such an empire.

I think that debates on 'empire' have a vital significance for the orientation of the Minjung movement as well as for the construction of the Minjung as subject of history. In this article, therefore, as the first step I will examine some vital points about the *Empire*.

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² Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000). The book was translated by Dr. Soo-Jong Yoon in Korean and published in 2001 by the publishing house, Ihaksa.

Secondly, I will suggest some ideas on the Minjung movement in times of globalization from a perspective of Minjung theology.

I. Vital Arguments of M. Hardt and A. Negri for the Birth of Empire

For the first step I sketch in my own manner some of the arguments of Hardt and Negri. They argue that imperialism has culminated in the coming into existence of an 'empire' (Hardt and Negri, p. xiii). The 'empire' has been formed in the process of expansion and assumption (namely: subjugating and swallowing) of capital. A form of sovereignty accords with the culmination of this process. It is a 'network power', because it is based on the global networks of financing, production, distribution and consumption (Hardt/Negri, pp. 309ff.).

1. The networks are operating as automatic machines for the profits of capital. The machine that works according to capitalistic principles is a combination of capital and labor, but labor has a different form and character from that of previous times. It is neither a disciplined labor (as in pre-Fordism) nor a mechanized labor (as in Fordism). In the network economy it is a 'socialized' labor in which the production and the reproduction section are integrated. At the same time it is an 'information-oriented' labor, that means, a labor which is supported by and integrated in highly developed information techniques. The center of the network economy is such a developed technology. Around it the labor powers are disposed flexibly in the form of regular or irregular employment and are excluded, in many cases, from the labor market. As the network economy operates successfully, gigantic profits are accumulated on one hand, and poverty and misery are prevalent on the other. People are compelled to accept the

‘discipline’ and ‘control’ of the network economy. Such a compulsion comes from the anxiety and fear that the chance for life could be lost when a person is excluded from the network economy.

2. Of course, the network economy that is formed from the logic of capital doesn’t come spontaneously from the requirement of that logic. The network economy comes from the strategies of capital that must cope with the crises in the capitalism. In other words, capitalists cannot help taking a position to struggles of the proletariat that is acute to the crises³. For example, the reaction of capital to the laborer’s protest movement and the accumulation crisis in the times of Fordism cannot bear fruit until the neo-liberal reform process is practiced successfully and, as a result, the state must be fixed as a capitalist state. It surrenders to the requirements of capital. It removes nearly all obstacles on the way to deregulation of the capital and labor market as well as to the liberalization of trade. It strives to make helpless the counter power of the laborer. Such a neo-liberal reform process is not a phenomenon on the national scale but is driven from its own logic on the global scale. From it results the global network economy and it requires a synthesis of sovereignties that accords with its own operation. The ‘empire’ is a ‘network power’ that comes into being in the synthesizing process.

3. The sovereignty of the ‘empire’ has a pyramid structure. In the uppermost stratum of the pyramid stands the mono-polar superpower. It practices a military and political hegemony over the globe. Superpowers are allied with it and they are named in current

³ In this sense Hardt and Negri hit a point: “The power of the proletariat imposes limits on capital and not only determines the crisis but also dictates the terms and nature of the transformation. The proletariat actually invents the social and productive forms that capital will be forced to adopt in the future” (Hardt/Negri, p. 268).

words as G8 states. Multinational and international organizations are regulated by the alliance⁴. They dominate military affairs, politics, economy, finance and trade on the global scale. All of this hegemonic apparatus is the power which sustains the integrity of the 'empire'. 'Monarchy' is a political principle to organize and bring this apparatus into operation.

In the middle part of the pyramid stand multinational corporations and regional economic blocks. They are the body of the 'empire' and play a role as global players who bring into circulation and operation the orders and directives of the 'empire'. They move according to the political principle of 'aristocracy'.

In the bottom of the pyramid stand national states, media, religious organizations and NGOs. On one hand some of them carry out orders and directives of the 'empire'. On the other hand they represent state's citizens and play according to the political principle of 'democracy'. Besides the national state that cannot avoid disruptions between directives of the 'empire' and requirements of the state's citizens, other organizations have a potency to make discourses prevail over the barriers of region, territory and state. But this apparatus embrace only the citizens of the state, and not the people who live as proletariat⁵.

Therefore we can say that the sovereignty of the 'empire' is a hierarchic mixture and over-articulation, namely a 'hybrid constitution', of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. Its archetype is the power structure of the Roman Empire (**Hardt/Negri, pp. 314f.**). The problem is that the plebeian cannot get their

⁴ To them belong, so I think, NATO, IMF, WTO, World Bank and BIS (Bank for International Settlements).

⁵ Hardt and Negri define the state's citizens as 'people'. While people are objects of the state domination, the 'proletariat' are dominated and worn out by the capital. As 'multitude' are those proletariat called, who aren't organized by trade unions or left-winged parties (**Hardt/Negri, p. 53; 61f.; 208ff.**).

democratic demands against directives of the emperor and interests of the nobility in the 'empire'.

4. The network economy and its corresponding 'empire' have neither a place outside themselves nor a center inside themselves. The 'empire' can no more be recognized as an imperialistic superpower. As a result, the 'empire' cannot be overthrown by the liberation movement of the people who will thereby secure their own liberated zone outside the imperialistic power.

If it is very clear that the 'empire' has been established in order to react to the protest movements of laborers and the accumulation crises in Fordism, it is also very obvious that the 'empire' must be dissolved by the protest and struggle of the proletariat against the network economy. If the 'empire' had a historical starting point, it would come to an end in history.

If the 'empire' has no outside, it can collapse only through implosion. In a desperate effort to avoid this implosion it will discipline and control its plebian masses. It engraves labor disciplines deeply in the body of the plebian and so enforces 'biopower' in the meaning of M. Foucault⁶. At the same time, it installs such a control system as to seem like a panopticon. Although it isolates and separates the plebian from each other, they can have the illusion that they are integrated in the communal life. It is the image politic in the 'society of the spectacle'⁷. Therefore the proletariat who is treated as plebian in the 'empire' must find schisms in the seemingly integrated everyday life and organize counter movements to get out of isolation and separation on the

⁶ Michel Foucault, *L'histoire de la sexualite Vol. 1: La volonte de savoir*, tr. by Jong-Ja Park, (Seoul: Nanam, 1990), 149ff.

⁷ Cf. Guy Debord, *The society of the spectacle*, tr. by Kyong-Sook Lee, Seoul: Hyunsilmunhwayonku 1996.

way to unity and solidarity. It is the strategy of the proletariat to implode the 'empire'.

The proletariat organizes counter movements in all the places where the omnipresent domination of the 'empire' appears. Though the 'empire' has no center, it exists over the whole globe. It has no special place for itself, which means that it exists in no-place (utopia). The plebian can hardly find out and discern their enemies. It is so because the 'empire' scatters them and hides them from the eyes of the plebian (Hardt/Negri, p. 190). Therefore, counter movements against the 'empire' can have no other than a global dimension. Globalization from above, namely, the globalization which is directed from the uppermost part of the 'empire', must be overcome by the globalization that is lead by the proletariat from below⁸. Their liberation movements form a global network of protest.

In organizing such protest and liberation movements the proletariat doesn't dare to ignore the fact that labor is today 'socialized' and 'information-oriented'. It means that protest and liberation movements can develop themselves no more in the form of factory-centered and politically organized movements of the proletariat (Hardt/Negri, pp. 53f.). They must make an effort to respect and fulfill the requirements of everyday life and attain legitimacy from it. In order to disjoint the machines which the 'empire' has used for disciplining and controlling the plebian, people must elaborate the parole and praxis which make the 'discipline' and 'control' of the 'empire' invalid: "global citizenship," "right to social wage" and sovereignty of the proletariat over technical systems (Hardt/Negri, pp. 396ff.). The aim is to recover the humanity of labor against the omnipotence of capital, to realize

⁸ Hardt and Negri define such a globalization from below as 'counter-globalization'. It brings a 'counter-empire' into being (Hardt/Negri, p. 207).

the cooperation of laborers against capitalistic exploitation and to require a free access to property against the bourgeois ownership of capital.

II. Critical Comments on the Arguments of M. Hardt and A. Negri

As has been seen above, crucial points of Hardt and Negri are in many aspects suggestive, but I don't think that the 'empire' is a historical reality. I believe that the *Empire* is nothing but one of the scenarios which describe tendencies to synthesizing sovereignties in accord with the network economy. I argue it in the following way:

1. Some scholars who follow the opinion of Hardt and Negri start from the presupposition that the 'empire' has been formed very rapidly and has been operating ordinarily since the collapse of real existing socialism. They speak of the birth of the 'empire' in that networks of financing, production, distribution and consumption are closely woven into the military and political hegemony of the USA in the global scale. They assume that a global domination system has been established and rules the networks.

But many things suggest that it is very hard to speak of the existing 'empire'. I point out only two things: the annual State of the Union Address of President Bush in 2002 in which Iraq, Iran and North Korea were called the 'axis of evil' and the Iraq war after the terrorism of the 11th September 2002.

It is short-eyed to define the Iraq war as an imperialistic invasion for the purpose of dominating and exploring the oil in that district. I support the analysis that through the Iraq war the USA aim not only to reinforce their domination over the oil resource, but also will attain the weapons to frustrate the intentions of the EU for their

own hegemony. It is very important to acknowledge that the strategies of the USA against North Korea are combined with the program to blockade the challenges of China to their military-political and economical hegemony. If one pays attention to the close relationship between Iran and Russia, one can understand easily why the USA show their hostile attitude to Iran.

The military and political hegemony of the USA can be easily and seriously challenged nowadays. From such a constellation comes the compulsion to build up the so-called Missile Defense System. People must attend to the cynical judgment that the military capacity of the USA is so meager that they can only attack such weak nations as Iraq, Iran and North Korea, although they pour an astronomical amount into the budget for military purposes⁹. In this sense, Iraq, Iran and North Korea are selected as scapegoats in order that the USA can restrain the hegemonic superpowers behind them.¹⁰

I want to emphasize once more that the expansion and assumption of capital cannot be realized automatically by its own power. In order to protect capital, violence must be equipped in the very place in which it advances and plays. Therefore one cannot speak of the external expansion and real assumption of capital being completed until the military and political hegemony is established and exists as a basis for the global empire.

I think that such an empire has not yet come into the world.

2. The international apparatus which are in charge of trade and military, political, economical and financial affairs, work more effectively since the beginning of the 1990s than in any other times.

⁹ Cf. Emmanuel Todd, *Après L'empire*, tr. by Kyong-Chol Joo, (Seoul: Kachi Publishing Co., 2003), p. 175.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 179.

In the previous times, of course, political compromises among the superpowers have shown unexpected abilities in the international economic order which was led by the USA. A good example was the Plaza Consensus 1985 which coerced Japan to lower the foreign exchange rate. Japan's property was plundered with this newly made arrangement to the extent of almost 80 billion dollars¹¹. In the 1990s such plundering has been carried out more bluntly. In the outbreak of the 1990s the bank system of Japan began to collapse after the BIS changed the reserve rate. In 1995, the year in which the WTO came into the world, the resulting trade norms gave a crushing blow to laborers and peasants both in the developed and in the developing countries. It is widely spread that the IMF compels countries which are experiencing a crisis of foreign liquidity to accept neo-liberal reform programs for the global network economy.

But it is not easy to arbitrate among the various interests of the nations in international organizations. As Hardt and Negri have recognized, the national state plays a significant role in carrying out the directives of the global network economy on one hand, but must also function as an apparatus to represent the state's citizens on the other hand. As a result, its delegation cannot help but show a schizophrenic thinking and acting in international organizations. Such a schizophrenia can disturb the seeming security of the global domination system. It means that people do not dare to ignore the national dimension in the struggle against the global network power. Although the state, which is loyal to the global directive system, violently and brutally forces the surrender of protest movements from below, oppression can be a permanent machine no more. The more that economic logic drives out a political autonomy in the

¹¹ Cf. Soejima Dakahiko, *Modern American political intellectuals*, tr. by Dong-Ki Shin, (Seoul: Dulnyok, 2001).

societies which are incorporated in the global network economy, the more necessary is the politic to bring various economic interests into balance.

3. If the 'empire' is nothing but a possible form of sovereignty in accord with the global network economy, and if it is not yet an established entity, protest movements against it can have no substance. People can be interested in an 'escape from the empire' and a 'nomadic' life style¹², but such orientations can also lead the proletariat to ignoring sharp contradictions between labor and capital and indulging in micro politics in everyday life. It is dangerous if people take no interest in the problems of the capitalist state in a world which is organized according to capitalistic principles. I think it naturally has its own meaning in forming a post-modern society in which people keep a critical distance from the 'discipline' and 'control' of the capital, and in which they will recognize and respect individual differentiation and desire. But it is a crucial point that such a post-modern society can have its own body when people make efforts to solve the contradictions between labor and capital in the global networks as well as in the capitalist state. It is meaningless for people to make vain efforts to kick off the 'no-place' of the 'empire'.

III. Aim and Tasks of the Minjung Movement in the Times of Globalization

Of course, we cannot say today that imperialistic domination and exploitation in brutality and violence have been already replaced with the finely polished control of the 'empire'. But it is very clear

¹² Cf., **Hardt/Negri, p. 212**: "Whereas in the disciplinary era sabotage was the fundamental notion of resistance, in the imperial control it may **be desertion.**"

that the global network economy requires a global control system for its successful operation. In order to cope with such a situation, I will work out and suggest a new concept of the Minjung movement from a perspective of Minjung theology. Before that I will make a brief sketch of how Minjung theology has supported the Minjung movement in the past.

1. The great contribution of Minjung theology lies in the insight that Minjung live and struggle as the subject of history. They are the covenant partner of God the Liberator and play a messianic role in the dawning Kingdom of God, namely in God's liberation and renewal process leading to the grand Sabbath. Their vision of a communal life can be realized when they make decisions together in all the spheres of life and accomplish justice and peace in all the relations of life. On the way to the grand Sabbath they select some criteria for decision and act under the historical conditions of life: participation, justice, peace and sustainability. These criteria play a role as milestones on the way to the Kingdom of God.

Regarding Minjung as subject of history, Minjung theologians have suggested three different paradigms. One of them is called the social biography of Minjung. The paradigm is methodologically based upon an ethnographical approach to the reality of Minjung. It contributed to breaking away the presuppositions and prejudices of intellectuals and to finding the subject position of Minjung in history. It shone especially in the times in which Minjung were degraded to be the object of suppression, exploitation and exclusion in the notorious military regime under General Park Jung-Hee. In the darkness of Korean history one could nearly have no idea of the subject position of Minjung. With the social biography of Minjung in hand, theologians developed a theology of witness.

The second paradigm was elaborated in the 1980s. It was basically oriented to a Marxist analysis of reality. Minjung was regarded as the coalition of different classes and strata. For younger Minjung theologians the coalition led a sort of people's democratic revolution in Korean society. Christians, devoted to the liberation of Minjung, have found some useful tools in the paradigm. They have paid more attention to the class problem in Korean society and made experiments to mediate a social-scientific analysis of reality and a theological reflection with each other.

The third paradigm was devised after the collapse of real existing socialism. Under strong influences from the civil society it denied any centeredness of movement, therefore it started from the diffuseness and over-articulation of various movements. It tended to build up a network of movements. In such a web various movements as follows could have their own place and carry out their own tasks, but also co-operate in solidarity: the environmental movement, feminist movement, culture movement, political movement, church reform movement, etc.

2. Looking into these paradigms one can detect many problems in each paradigm. Firstly, Minjung is seemingly regarded as an object of observation from the viewpoint of an anthropologist. Such an approach is not suitable to understanding the reality of Minjung. Because Minjung are the ensemble of social relations, the ethnographical approach cannot be a substitute for a social-scientific analysis of these relations.

Secondly, the class analysis can fulfill the requirement to analyze the reality of Minjung in terms of social science. But it is very weak in that it will not recognize the relative autonomy of the feminist, culture, political, church reform movement for example. It reduces these movements to an integral part of the whole movement.

Lastly, the network movement, which puts an emphasis upon a horizontal co-operation and the solidarity of various movements, has a blurred vision of the contradiction structure in the market society.

I think that we must suggest a new paradigm for realizing the subjectivity of Minjung in the process of globalization. The liberation movement of Minjung can take a network form of various initiatives.¹³ But the formation of network starts from the understanding that the contradiction between labor and capital penetrates into the process of globalization, and that the contradiction appears in various forms, such as in politics, economy, culture etc. The network movement doesn't dare to escape from the task of solving the contradiction. At the same time, it endeavors to give an elaborated perspective on the new formation of economy, politics and culture. For example, it is useless to separate sexism, racism or generation conflict from the class problem. But it is also absurd to reduce cultural issues to the class problem. One point is very clear: although the Minjung problem may have a variety of appearances in the economical, political and cultural dimensions of life, they cannot reach the position of being the subject of history, if they remain as objects of the expanding and assuming capital. They cannot stand on their own feet until they have a real sovereignty over the capital.

3. Now I would suggest some vital points of the network movement in the following:

¹³ I think that it is rather suitable for our context to speak of the disposition of Minjung against the 'discipline' and 'control' system than to articulate the composition of Minjung. At the same time, I will emphasize that the proletariat plays a decisive and productive role in the Movements of Minjung against the globalization from above.

1) I think that the anti-war and peace movement against the military-political hegemony of the USA can act nowadays as a deterrent to globalization from above. Campaigns against MD (Missile Defense System) can block the appearance of the 'empire'.

The anti-war and peace movement has the very target if it understands that the extent of expansion and assumption of capital is determined in the last analysis by military-political violence.¹⁴ It is also important to acknowledge that the network economy, supported by violence, brings to the grave both those in the invading country and in the invaded country.

2) If the 'empire' is about to be born, it is vital to resist the formation of it. It is very important and necessary to give pressure to the decision making process in all the instances where the norms for operating the global network economy are formulated. Such a protest movement demands a retraction of these norms and endeavors to suggest an alternative perspective for globalization from below¹⁵. The interests of Minjung can be respected and realized only through globalization from below. The lists of struggles against globalization from above are very long¹⁶.

These struggles show that the Minjung will bring the logic of economy and the logic of solidarity into balance, and that the politic must be recovered for such a balancing.

¹⁴ Cf., Alex T. Callicos, *New Mandarins of American Power: The Bush Administration's Plans for the World*, tr. by Yong-Uk Kim, (Seoul: Galmuri, 2004), pp. 108f.

¹⁵ Cf., Jeremy Brecher, Tim Costello, Brendan Smith, *Globalization from below: the power of solidarity*, tr. by Dok-Lyol Lee, (Koyang: I-Field, 2003).

¹⁶ For example: Zapatista Revolt 1995; Protest against the MAI 1998; Seattle Struggle against the WTO meeting 1999; World Social Forums in Portu Alegre, etc.

3) Therefore it is nonsense, if one assumes the globalization process from above as irreversible and inescapable, if one blames the protest movements against globalization as anachronistic, and if one is even suspicious of an impossible attempt to restore the state-centeredness and to adhere to the modernity (cf. **Hardt and Negri, p. 46**). But the aim of the Minjung movement is to democratize the apparatus regulating the global network economy and to bring it under the control of the Minjung. In order to come to such an aim, it is inevitable to build up a national state which is really controlled by the Minjung and to coerce delegates of the state to represent the interests of the Minjung in the vital instances of various international organizations.¹⁷ I don't think that such strategies are nationalistic and state-centered. It is rather absolutely absurd to deny the substance of national states, of which the international apparatus consists.

At the same time, if the national state is controlled by the Minjung, it ceases to accept and carry out directives from the global networks. People have seen in the long run that many left-winged governments play a role as agents for neo-liberal globalization. This is because they are independent of the sovereignty of the Minjung. If so, people can only see the cluster of democracy. The politic of the Minjung withers to death. In order to press down the emerging 'empire', it must be isolated and disassembled. For such a purpose the politic of the Minjung, namely, real democracy, must be revitalized.

4) In order to make the real democracy vivid, it is necessary to take away the machines which the global players have used to isolate and separate the Minjung from each other. Hardt and Negri have suggested the vital point that the network power will reinforce

¹⁷ In this sense I stand against **Hardt and Negri, pp. 150f.**

the control system, while it leaves modern forms of 'discipline' behind it. The Minjung are fallen in the slough of individualization. They tend consciously or unconsciously to solve the problems in everyday life and its sub-systems in an individualistic manner. For example, they fall into deathly competition for qualifications and jobs; they are indifferent to the problematic system of the annual salary, although it divides the labor market in the corporation and makes collective bargaining vain.

The tendency to individualization can be stronger in the so-called 'experience society' in which reality is easily changed into images through multi-media. Through imaginary manipulation and configuration the individuals, who are in reality isolated and separated, can be led to an illusion that they are integrated. This is characteristic of culture in the so-called "spectacle society." In it people experience alienation from others as well as from themselves.

In order to get out of this alienation to a real integration, cultural struggle against the imagery machine as well as psychoanalysis of illusion is naturally required, but is not sufficient. A cognitive reorientation can suggest that reality is turned upside down in imagery, but this is also insufficient. On the way to an integral society the Minjung must find out together how to solve the great or small problems that come from everyday life and its sub-systems. They must organize various practices to share more benefits and advantages among themselves. People suggest various examples for such a practice:

- efforts to reform school systems
- monitoring media
- monitoring corporations and promoting investments in terms of social and environmental responsibility

- recognizing female rights and overcoming sexism in the patriarchal culture
- environmental protection
- co-operation and direct exchange between persons in the city and on the land
- community movement
- opening flea markets periodically for sharing together
- campaign against racial discrimination etc.

In doing such activities we can conceive of the abnormality behind the seemingly normal and make efforts to readjust it. We can experience vividly the communal life of the Minjung.

5. The movement for 'autonomy', which has been suggested by Hardt and Negri, doesn't lose its light, although people take distance from the assumption that the 'empire' seemingly came into being. In a global market society people should recognize it as the right of labor to demand 'global citizenship', to institutionalize the 'social wage' and to realize the sovereignty of the proletariat over capital. Such points are crucial for an economy which is more humanly, more socially and more ecologically oriented.

Because of production and consumption in a global scale it is a matter of course to demand a 'nomadic' immigration of the labor power. It is also a counter-strategy of labor against the capital which moves freely and knows no barrier over the world. If the right to free immigration is guaranteed, the apparatus which takes charge of the possible fittest allocation of capital over the world appears rapidly. The representatives of capital know very well that it is more advantageous to set up and practice a sort of Marshall Plan in the global scale than to see with their arms folded how the laborers move to booming places in which capital is concentrated.

Because of a gigantic structure adjustment and labor rationalization it is necessary to collect more profit taxes for social and welfare policy. It is also a natural demand to share jobs through the policy of reducing hours of labor, and to share conditions of life through the policy of a solitary distribution of wages. For such a purpose it is inevitable to establish the system which is responsible for the possible fittest allocation of working hours among the people who have a capacity to work and want jobs. The persons who cannot work because of age or who have no more ability to work are given the basic income which guarantees a human and cultural life.

In a civilized society it is common sense that capital comes from labor, and that the former must stand under the control of the latter. The society in which such common sense is no more valid is called barbarian. In order to run away from such a barbarian state of things the laborers cannot but control the capital which has been independent of the labor and has dominated it. People must reform bourgeois ownership as an institution for the domination of capital. Nothing is more important than to abrogate the intellectual property right which has guaranteed excess profits and brought great disturbers into the market. Through such measures the proletariat recovers their sovereignty over the capital and enjoys a free access to property.

The very point is that such advanced proposals of Hardt and Negri cannot be realized until the national state moves to this **direction.**

In the last step I would cite the famous words of Jesus. He stood among the mass and said to them as follows:

“Come to me, those who work hard and carry heavy burdens on their own back! I would give you rest. I am gentle!”