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Lucas Kaelin

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Around Manila on Foot: Hardt and Negri on the Commons¹

LUCAS KAELIN



I love to walk, around the block, through my neighborhood, across the city. It's my favorite way to get to know a place. If a city is too big to be explored on foot, I move around on buses and trains, public transport map in hand. I made my home this way in Munich and London. Manila, however, was a different story. Throughout my stay, it remained difficult to “appropriate” this new city in the way I used to be able to elsewhere.² Who or what was to blame for it? Oh, I thought, city planners who built it with little consideration for the safety and convenience of pedestrians! Filipinos who do not go anywhere on foot if they could just as easily hop on something that moves! Manila's heat and pollution, powerful disincentives to the strollers and hikers!³

Now, as I see it, what is just as much to blame for it is the operative understanding in Manila of the relationship between the private and the public. There is no direction in which one can head in Metro Manila, for instance, without running the risk of bumping up against a “restricted area” — either a shantytown (these “squatter” communities

¹Manila will be used in this article to describe the whole of Metro Manila. My experience focuses mainly on Manila proper and Quezon City.

²I cannot other than express it in this way. However, I would like to make two reservations, firstly, it might well be that this “appropriation” is already a chimera. What exactly would I appropriate? But it still seems that this exploration of a city is the way of feeling at home. Secondly, some care is required when we use the word appropriation, as it is modeled after the very idea of private property that should be overcome.

³In the Robert Zemeckis film “Back to the Future, Part III” (1990), Dr. Emmett Brown, one of the two main characters, earns some laughs when he explains that in late 20th century people will walk only for recreation.

are ubiquitous throughout the entire metropolitan landscape), or (equally ubiquitous) a “gated community.” The former generally do not contain the landmarks visitors need to get properly orientated to the city, are easy to lose one’s way in, and thus are best avoided. The latter, which generally serve as home to the city’s economic elite, tend to be separated from the surrounding cityscape by high perimeter walls, tight security arrangements, and a general inaccessibility to non-residents, or “outsiders.” If one could get *into* them, one still would not be able to walk “through” them in any simple sense; they contain private road networks that double back upon themselves so as to return anyone walking or, more likely, driving in, to his or her starting point, at their main entrance or gate. The “subdivision” in which I resided for one year before moving out to a non-gated area of the city, operationalized this idea well; two out of its five entrance/exit points were operational during the day, one of them at night.

The filigree of public roads that crisscross the city itself offer the peripatetic little additional comfort. Many of these roads go without sidewalks, and where there are sidewalks, these often are commandeered by parked private vehicles, or by the owners of little commercial establishments who have extended by a meter or two their car repair shops, variety stores, food stalls, by co-opting (in a no-contest scenario) space in the city rightfully the pedestrian’s. Other roads are closed off to vehicular and even foot traffic because local neighborhoods have simply taken them over for such local uses as their basketball games, variety shows, etc. Such practices, common in Manila, not only impair people’s freedom of movement, but also make any kind of movement a major affair by stretching many times over the “beeline” or actual distance between points in the city that people need to traverse to get anywhere at all. Additionally, there is the problem posed to the peripatetic by Manila’s prevalent architectural style. Manila architecture tends to seal off from public view properties facing the street. What this means is that, generally, only massive gates and high concrete walls, meet the peripatetic’s eye, creating the problem of *visual* inaccessibility on top of the *physical*.⁴

⁴It’s like in Switzerland, mountains everywhere that obstruct the sight. That’s why one of the slogans of the 1968 student protests in Switzerland was “down with the Alps, free sight on the Mediterranean Sea.”

An Interpretation with Empire (Hardt and Negri)

In their collaborative, neo-Marxist, postmodern meta-narrative of globalization, *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri discuss relations between the public and the private particularly as these relate to modern urban architecture along with its penchant for “abolishing” the public.⁵ They write:

The urban landscape is shifting from the modern focus on the common square and the public encounter to the closed spaces of malls, freeways and gated communities.⁶

Prior to the privatization of hitherto “public” spaces, people interacted with one another across social barriers. In a reversal of that, by “creating a series of protected interior and isolated spaces,” the modern urban landscape tends to “limit public access and interaction in such a way as to avoid the chance encounter of diverse populations.”⁷ This is perfectly descriptive of the community at the Ateneo de Manila University where, for two and a half years, I taught philosophy. In keeping with their social backgrounds and economic standing, a good number of my students and colleagues resided in the fiercely securitized gated communities I adverted to above – at the same time tiem, of course, that they were affiliated with an equally highly securitized Ateneo campus. The only other location they tended to cluster about, in connection with their recreational pursuits, was one or another of Manila’s ubiquitous, equally highly securitized malls. The heterogeneity of things and places available in Manila’s urban sprawl meant little to my students who, because their lives were truly elsewhere, had little motive to explore them. The city’s pollution, heat, and poor infrastructure put additional pressure on them to keep their point of contact down to the panhandler who, at one or another of the

⁵The idea of a postmodern metanarrative sound like a contradiction in terms, and at times Hardt and Negri’s attempt seems to be paradoxical. However, this metanarrative has been hailed with mainly positive reviews, Slavoj Žižek calling it “The Communist Manifesto for our time.”

⁶Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Empire*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 188

city's many red lights, would approach their vehicle to signal by a light tap on their tightly rolled-up, heavily tinted, car windows how grateful they would be for a few coins. I myself felt that I needed to grasp as much as I could of this "outside" world, before I could call Manila my home. So I persisted in walking. But to put these observations about Manila in perspective, let us return to Hardt and Negri:

Los Angeles is perhaps the leader in the trend toward what Mike Davis calls 'fortress architecture,' in which not only private homes but also commercial centers and government buildings create open and free environments internally by creating a closed and impenetrable exterior.⁸

Manila, therefore, is not a geographically isolated phenomenon. How well I know that in Europe, communities are as much caught up in the frenzy of privatization as those elsewhere. Hitherto public utilities, such as water, electricity, the railway system, and the postal service, in the past two decades alone migrated into private ownership. Truly emblematic of this is modern European architecture. Contrast, for example, Munich's Olympic Stadium, which was built in 1972 for the Olympic Games, with the Allianz Arena, which was built in 2006 for the Football World Cup.



Olympic Stadium, Munich 1972.⁹

⁸*Ibid*, p. 337.

⁹Picture from: http://www.wittmann-uebersetzungen.de/olympiastadium_muenchen.jpg (June 16, 2007)
<https://archivum.ateneo.edu/budhi/vol11/iss1/7>



Allianz Arena, Munich 2006.¹⁰

What is striking about the Olympic Stadium is that, while it is built at the city's edge, the understanding is that it is not "outside" the city; that, in fact, it opens toward the city, even as it blends with the large expanse of public space, that is, the park, around it. And depending on the directionality of the wind, the roar of fans at a game, and music from public concerts held in it, carry all the way into the city center. In this way, the public is always present to it, or may come to it at any point free of charge, especially the open-air concerts that occur on the lakeshore next to the Stadium. The Stadium is, in that sense, an emblem of the open, liberal democracy.

The Allianz Arena (its very name, Allianz, which belongs to a giant Munich-based insurance firm, smacks of privatization), is an athletic complex that is similarly built on the outskirts of Munich, just where one comes off a large highway interchange. But it is unlike the Olympic Stadium in many ways. For one thing, it features an architectural design hermetically sealing it against the outside. For another it loops around inside, precisely to create an enclosed, private space. Additionally, a luminous reddish light radiates outward from its sides, not to meld it with its surroundings, but to grab the attention of motorists on the nearby highway, posing in that way a hazard to them, and an explanation for the high number of car accidents in the area.

¹⁰Picture from: http://www.uoregon.edu/~dteach/pm300_allianz_arena12.jpg (June 16, 2007)

I could refer, of course, to other instantiations of the shift from the public to the private. I am thinking of the example of McKinsey, the management consultancy firm. Not too long ago, it celebrated its company anniversary by renting from the city of Berlin two streets in the heart of Berlin City Center; and then for the duration of the party, it closed off these streets to public use. To take another example, in 2007, despite public opposition, Zürich opened an “urban entertainment center,” the first of its kind in Switzerland that, not unlike malls in general, is built to keep the outside “out” at the same time that it encloses within a sizable “roaming” space. It would be well for us to remember that, earlier, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, public parks were created to provide people with this “roaming” space.¹¹

Political Implications

Functionally equivalent as park and mall may be, access and purpose are quite different. Universal access to malls is not guaranteed and its main purpose is consumerism. “This tendency,” Hardt and Negri write,

in urban planning and architecture has established in concrete, physical terms what we called earlier the end of the outside, or rather the decline of public space that had allowed for open and unprogrammed social interaction.¹²

Prior to the “end of the outside,” societies may have been segmented racially, but they were not, as today, segmented *actually*, that is, spatially. Under today’s stark conditions of spatial segmentation, north, south, center, and periphery are closer together, but there have been no corresponding adjustments to people’s way of life, or standard of living, in order to bring down the barriers separating them. The withering away of the political has resulted instead in the shrinkage of the public realm. So while economically, culturally, and socially

¹¹Thanks to Professor Emma Polio of Ateneo’s Sociology Department who brought this functional equivalence to my attention.

¹²Enunje, p. 337
<https://archivum.ateneo.edu/budhi/vol11/iss1/7>

disparate and unequal populations stand cheek by jowl alongside of one another, they do not tend to interact with one another. Hardt and Negri write:

The place of modern liberal politics has disappeared, and thus from this perspective our postmodern and imperial society is characterized by a deficit of the political.¹³

In the aftermath of privatization, shared life-worlds within which, formerly, heterogeneous social groupings engaged one another, have disappeared, causing people to carry on, not integrally, not as a *commonwealth*, but in separated fashion. Economic exigencies trump political activity. Politics itself is stripped of its planning and organizing functions, collapsing it into a dull pretense at collective decision-making. The architecture of the modern urban landscape fits perfectly into this picture.

Beyond the Private, Towards the Common

The rest of the story is supplied by the operative understanding of the relationship between public and private supplies – and its underlying basis the commons. Hardt and Negri begin their discussion of this in “Commons” (*Empire*), in speaking of the modern conundrum of private property:

The concept of private property itself, understood as the exclusive right to use a good and dispose of all wealth that derives from the possession of it, becomes increasingly nonsensical in this new situation.¹⁴

We operate today, they continue, a “productive world made up of communication and social networks, interactive services, and common languages,”¹⁵ in other words, of “immaterial production.”

¹³*Ibid*, p. 188.

¹⁴*Ibid*, p. 302. Note that Hardt and Negri go after the *concept* of private property, not the juridical framework within which its practice emerges.

¹⁵*Ibid*, p. 7.
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There are distinct problems for the notion of “private property” within such a world.

Our economic and social reality is defined less by the material objects that are made and consumed than by co-produced services and relationships. Producing increasingly means constructing cooperation and communicative commonalities.¹⁶

In *Multitude*, the sequel to *Empire*, Hardt and Negri continue their discussion of this notion of the “common.”¹⁷ They speak of “the becoming common of labor.”¹⁸ They explain its occurrence in terms of Marx’s insistence that “[h]umanity and its soul are produced in the very processes of economic production.”¹⁹ The operative shift from an industrial to a service economy is transformative of society itself in that it diminishes the importance within it of durable, material, industrial production in favor of “immaterial production,” that is, of “a service, knowledge, or communication.”²⁰ “Immaterial labor” occurs either as intellectual, linguistic labor, or as affective labor. Hardt writes the former kind of immaterial labor “produces ideas, symbols, codes, texts, linguistic figures, images, and other such products,”²¹ whereas the latter has quite directly to do with the play on affects,²² such as, say, a flight attendant engages when she produces a sense of wellness in those aboard her flight simply by being attentive to their needs, or

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷Hardt and Negri prefer to speak of *the common* instead of the old notion of *the commons*: “We are reluctant call this *the commons* because that term refers to pre-capitalist-shared spaces that were destroyed by the advent of private property. Although more awkward, ‘the common’ highlights the philosophical content of the term and emphasizes that this is not a return to the past but a new development.” (Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Multitude*, The Penguin Press: New York, 2004, p. xv).

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 103-115.

¹⁹Michael Hardt: “Affective Labor,” in *boundary 2*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Summer, 1999, p. 91.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 94.

²¹*Multitude*, p. 108.

²²Michael Hardt provides an account of the biopolitical function of affective labor in his essay “Affective Labor”. Building on Foucault’s notion of biopower, he then criticizes Foucault for understanding the production of life only as a prerogative of the dominant force in society and dismissing the possibility of “biopower from below” (Hardt: *Affective Labor*, p. 98). However, entering this discussion would go beyond the focus of this article.

a caregiver in his patient by materially easing the inconveniences of illness, or a journalist who writes in order to produce specific affects in his readership. What the job market appears to be saying today is that the “worker must be especially adept at affective labor,”²³ and to this end it specifies that job applicants possess both a “good attitude” and a sufficiency of “social skills.”

So while it may still appear that labor produces still mostly material goods, and that the world’s total agricultural output still eclipses industry and services, the quantitative element in labor has not prevented immaterial labor from becoming hegemonic, or other types of labor from transforming in accordance with this type of labor. Immaterial labor today occupies a position similar to that of industrial labor 150 years ago. And just as the hegemony of industrial production triggered the industrialization of the whole of labor and of society, so also the hegemony of immaterial labor has led labor to “informationatize,” that is to say, “become intelligent, become communicative, become affective.”²⁴ Whereas the industrial age had required types of workers with the capacity to deal with a machine, our own time of immaterial production has workers dealing with knowledge, information, communication, and affects.²⁵ This transformation extends well beyond the realm of the economic sphere and encompasses the whole of social life. Labor, more and more, is “embedded in cooperative and communicative networks. Anyone who works with information or knowledge... relies on the common knowledge passed down from others and in turn creates new common knowledge.”²⁶ We are caught up, as it were, in a steady stream, not of individual and private production, but of *common* immaterial production – of knowledge, affects, and cooperation. Hardt and Negri characterize it in terms of the “biopolitical production” of the entire social realm.

²³*Multitude*, p. 108.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 109.

²⁵Cf. *Multitude* p. 109. Put simply: Man working on a machine in a factory has to become a machine himself, as numerous films in the prime of industrial age such as Charlie Chaplin’s “Modern Times” or Fritz Lang’s “Metropolis” can give evidence. While in today’s world, man working in front of a computer has to a certain extent to become like a computer dealing with language, communication and knowledge.

²⁶*Multitude*, p. xv.
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The notion of *common* production has a counterpart in the production of the common. Common biopolitical production constantly creates common goods. This is best understood in terms of linguistic production, which is one of the central forms of immaterial labor. Linguistic production has, as Hardt and Negri explain, a triple relation to the common: our power to speak is based in the common, that is, our shared language; every linguistic act creates the common; and the act of speech itself is conducted in common, in dialogue, in communication.²⁷

Language not only is the shared basis of production, but also is the common product of labor. The heterogeneous forms of immaterial labor similarly produce the common. This is instantiated by the Internet, rapid innovations upon which, especially in its early history, have been in consequence of its very commonality. “Internet practitioners and cybernetic specialists,” Hardt and Negri write, “insist that the openness of the electronic commons was the primary factor that allowed for the great innovation of the early period of the information revolution.”²⁸ Take “web 2.0.” Given the fact it is a “common” consisting of open encyclopedias and shared virtual spaces, and that it has, as such, been incredibly important to the production of contemporary “humanity and its soul,” once could speak, in relation to it and to its outcomes, of a “spiral, expansive relationship”²⁹ obtaining between common production and the production of the common. This “common” ought to be possible to describe in today’s terms of the practices of democracy. Indeed, “[t]his biopolitical production and its expansion of the common is one strong pillar on which stands the possibility of global democracy today.”³⁰

The transition to an increasingly common world, however, has not been always smooth. Manila and, as I indicated, certain other cities, instantiate the intensifying privatization which as occurred in many important areas of human living in apparent reaction to the proliferation of democratic practices in our world today. As a case in point, consider the vigorous enforcement of “property rights” upon the products of common immaterial labor, such as “brands,” the products

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 201.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 337.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 197.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. xxv.

of the culture industry, computer programs, etc. Instead of becoming less uptight about the specification of these products as “private” since they were produced in “common” by immaterial labor, we have tended to operate the reverse, as we become more and more insistent about codifying, and implementing with the full force of the law, “property laws” that turn out not be so new, considering their grounding in traditional protocols dealing with the designation and disposition of private property. Ironically, Hardt and Negri write, “as property becomes ethereal, it tends to slip through the grasp of all the existing mechanisms of protection, requiring expanded protection efforts on the part of the sovereign authority.”³¹ Hence the stridency with which Western nations routinely score China for its lack of interest in enforcing and protecting immaterial property rights.

Back on the Streets of Manila

Let us return to the streets of Manila, to trace anew the relationship between private and public and the commonality of the life on the streets. Walking one day through the profusion of Manila, I chanced upon the crowded districts of Quiapo and Divisoria. There I observed an astonishing degree of self-organization, and a shared commonality as well. People’s existence as street vendors, “pedicab” (an unmotorized tricycle) drivers, merchants of every stripe of ingenuity and ruthlessness was at best precarious. Marx would have pigeonholed them as the *Lumpenproletariat* (rag proletariat).³² But these people also shared in the common production and organization of the streets as a market place. Immaterial labor, which consists of multi-colored candles, herbal medicine, and a myriad other goods and services, are necessary for this world to exist at all.

Two important objections could be raised against this positive picture of the common life on the streets. Firstly, one might argue that we are dealing here rather with a pre-modern than with a post-modern type of commonality, and therefore that we cannot simply equate this life in common with a post-industrial life in common. Secondly, and more importantly, it can be objected that the described life is in

³¹*Ibid.*

³²*Ibid.*, p. 180

fact not common but rather based on individualistic competition. However, we should not fall into the trap of thinking of history in terms of a necessarily linear development. There is no single way of running through the different stages of economic and technological development, as Marx thought. It may well be that in one and the same society different cultural forms co-exist and in their interaction bring about radical change. And while, truly, we must not succumb to any kind of “social romanticism” but must acknowledge rather that life on the streets is shaped by competition and repression, we must not be blind either to the role the idea of the common plays in the *construction* of that collective consciousness that we call a common identity. Such would allow for the establishment upon these islands of an inclusive and democratic society.