Development, **2004**, **47**(1), (27–34)
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www.sidint.org/development

*Thematic Section*

# The Violence of Development: Two political imaginaries

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ABSTRACT *J.K. Gibson-Graham explores two responses to the violence of development – the politics of empire and the politics of place. Drawing on the well-known book* Empire *by Hardt and Negri, the experience of the SID project on Women and the Politics of Place, and a slum dwellers' initiative in India, she attempts to open up alternatives to the dominance of capital and affirm a new political space.*

KEYWORDS *empire; politics of place; women; capitalism; transformation; alternatives*

## Two political imaginaries

Contemplating the violence of development, as it threatens the diverse global plurality of cultural, political and economic existences, we face the daunting task of countering or creating something different from the 'dominant'. Yet we do not confront this task without resources or experiences of success. The archives, lore and present configurations of progressive activism suggest two distinct (yet potentially intertwined) paths of transformative action – one we might call 'the politics of empire' and the other 'the politics of place'. The former confronts a singular formation, a global form of power that yokes all life into a single space of dominion; by marshalling a worldwide movement, it proposes to meet that formation 'at the same level of totality' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 21). The latter, while not necessarily refusing to theorize a global order, refuses to engage with it directly, preferring to construct alternatives in place. Whereas the politics of empire offers a familiar paradigm of revolution, the politics of place is less readily recognizable (although in practice perhaps more widespread). A recently inaugurated project called Women and the Politics of Place (WPP)[1] is attempting to narrate and theorize this globally emergent form of localized politics – one that is largely *of* if not necessarily *for* women – and thus bring this politics into a new stage of being.

## Women and the politics of place

One of the inspirations for the WPP project has been the desire to assert a logic of difference and possibility against the homogenizing tendencies of globalization, the teleological generalities of political economy and the violence of development (Dirlik, 2002;

Graham, 2002; Harcourt and Escobar, 2002). The vision is that women are both threatened and mobilized by the contemporary wave of globalization and that they are already everywhere engaged in constructing and revitalizing places, in response to the exigencies and possibilities of their everyday lives. What the project hopes to do is foster this tenacious, dispersed and barely visible 'movement', creating connections (networks or 'meshworks'), sharing information and inspiration through academic and non-academic channels and developing local experiments into a collective knowledge that will spawn and support more projects and ideas. Representing this movement and connecting its participants, the project will create a recognized (self-)identity for something that already exists, thereby empowering and expanding it.

Without opposing the politics of empire, WPP is attempting to make room for a vision and a self-knowledge of local initiatives as powerful and efficacious, not simply a prelude or second best to a global movement or organization. Social movements and their successes have called into question the distinction between global revolution and local reform, showing that small-scale changes can be transformative, and that place-based politics can be a revolutionary force when replicated across a global terrain. Drawing on the political imaginary that feminism and other social movements have produced, the project poses an everyday and local alternative to the millennial and global politics of empire. This politics can start *now* and here *in place* rather than in a future time and space of revolutionary organization.

Like the politics of empire, the politics of place is a potent political imaginary, resonating with worldviews, fantasies, desires, and political presentiments that are now widely shared. Both imaginaries are currently informing responses to the violence of development, as the stories that follow attest.

## The politics of empire

Arguably, the most compelling contemporary evocation of traditional revolutionary politics is to be found in the book *Empire* by Hardt and Negri (2000), touted by the authors as a new communist manifesto. The main character in the book, Empire, is the global form of sovereignty that has replaced modern sovereignty. Its command is not exercised through the 'disciplinary modalities of the modern state' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 344) but through biopolitical control. In this Deleuzian/Foucaultian conception, power operates pervasively in every register of the social order, most novelly and prominently that of subjectivity.

Empire is global in the double sense of thoroughgoing and extensive – it has no spatial limits, no boundaries, no interstices, no outside. In this way, it resembles capitalism, which is its economic counterpart, accomplice and principal condition of existence. With the consolidation of Empire, political and economic power have finally come together to form 'a properly capitalist order' (*ibid.*: 25) in which production, politics and life itself are dominated by capitalism on a global scale (*ibid.*: 64).

Capitalism has created not only Empire but also the agent of its ultimate transformation, the multitude. The multitude is a postmodern proletariat, not the homogeneous and exclusive industrial working class, but a heterogeneous social productivity – waged and unwaged, material and immaterial, productive, unproductive and reproductive, labour enclosed in factories or scattered across the 'unbounded social terrain' (*ibid.*: 53).[2] 'The deterritorializing power of the multitude is the productive force that sustains Empire and at the same time the force that calls for and makes necessary its destruction' (*ibid.*: 61).

Updating the tradition of Marx and Engels, Hardt and Negri see the socialization of production (which enables efficient exploitation) and its increasingly informational form (which enables the society of control)[3] as creating the preconditions for Empire's demise. Not only cooperation and collectivity but also communication has matured to a fullness. Labour has become fully subsumed to capital, and thus has actually become capital, and capital has become one with sovereign control. Eventually, the cooperative, communicative productivity that is the truth of both capital and control will transform itself and throw off its container, Empire.

How will this revolution come about, by what political means? The authors envision not simply

micro-political resistances, and not simply collectively organized revolt, although these anti-Empire moves are certainly part of the story; they also foresee in the multitude an alternative, utopian, world-making power that is not captured by or implicated in what it is posed against (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 242). But first (or in the process) the multitude must find its political subjectivity. 'We need to investigate specifically how the multitude can become a *political subject* in the context of Empire' (ibid: 394). When that happens, the world will be totally transformed:

> This is a revolution that no power will control – because biopower and communism, cooperation and revolution remain together, in love, simplicity, and also innocence. This is the irrepressible lightness and joy of being communist (*ibid.*: 413).

Hardt and Negri liken the potential of the multitude to the 'enormous potential of subjectivity' (*ibid.*: 21) that was the form in which the birth of Christianity intersected the decline of the Roman Empire. As with the Christian revolution, the realization of the multitude as a 'radical counter-power' (*ibid.*: 66) must be animated by an irresistible 'prophetic desire' (*ibid.*: 65) – which Hardt and Negri hope to kindle with their book.

For those steeped in the Marxist tradition, Hardt and Negri's commitment to writing a communist manifesto for the twenty first century will be everywhere evident and even compelling.[4] What is most familiar here is the Marxism of the totality and the accompanying vision of total transformation that has become the paradigm of revolutionary politics. Both Marxism and *Empire* have reoccupied the eschatological narrative of medieval Christianity, producing an expectation of millennial transformation as the goal and outcome of any truly radical politics (Laclau, 1990: 74). Every other kind of political effort is dismissed as accommodation or reform. Hardt and Negri explicitly devalue place-based politics as reactive and defensive, constituting a nostalgic retreat to the small and manageable in the face of the daunting challenges of global capitalism and Empire (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 44–5). Their vision sets up a single (economically grounded) path as the revolutionary option, against the reformism or parochialism of other political paths.

From the perspective of Empire, then, politics conceived and enacted at the global or national scales is important and transformative, while localized politics is contained, co-opted or inconsequential by virtue of its presumed isolation and diminutive scale. A principal justification for this view is that both exploitation and domination are constituted through a global system or structure of power, and thus a globally organized project is the required political form. Once again the logic of the totality dictates the logic of its (eventual) transformation.

## The politics of place

Rather than confronting this vision of the true path, practitioners of a 'politics of place' tend to sidestep it, thus calling into question its relevance rather than its authenticity. The politics of place is a product of the new social movements of the last 40 years, movements that arguably gave rise to a distinctive understanding and practice of politics, one that is hinted at although not quite captured in the feminist phrase 'the personal is political'. Whereas formerly politics was seen to involve large groups of people or small numbers of highly influential individuals organizing to gain power or create change, second-wave feminism initiated a politics of local and personal transformation – a 'politics of becoming' in Connolly's terms (1999: 57). Feminism circulated as a language rather than (primarily) as a revolutionary organizational and purposive project. Without rejecting the familiar politics of organizing and networking within groups and across space, individual women and collectivities pursued local paths and strategies that were based on avowedly feminist visions and values, but were not otherwise connected. The movement achieved global coverage without having to create global institutions, although some of these did indeed come into being. Ubiquity rather than unity was the ground of its globalization.

Women and the Politics of Place builds on that ground, extending the idea of a politics of ubiquity by emphasizing its ontological substrate: a vast set of disarticulated 'places' – households, social

communities, ecosystems, workplaces, organizations, bodies, public arenas, urban spaces, diasporas, regions, occupations – related analogically rather than organically and connected through webs of signification. If *women* are everywhere, *a woman* is always somewhere, and those somewheres are what the project is interested in: places being created, strengthened, defended, augmented, transformed by women.

Our example of this politics comes from a story called 'Deep Democracy' told by Arjun Appadurai. 'Deep Democracy' is a narrative representation of an organization called the Alliance, which is located in Mumbai, the largest city in India. Approximately half of the 12 million citizens of Mumbai are slum and pavement dwellers who occupy eight per cent of the land (Appadurai, 2002: 26). Not surprisingly, 'housing is at the heart' of their lives (*ibid.*: 27).

The Alliance is made up of three federated organizations – an NGO formed by local social workers to deal with problems of urban poverty; a community-based organization called the National Slum Dwellers' Federation, historically based in Mumbai; and Mahila Milan, an organization of poor women based in Mumbai and networked throughout India, addressing urban poor women's issues. They work together in what Appadurai characterizes as 'a politics of accommodation, negotiation, and long-term pressure rather than of confrontation or threats of political reprisal' (*ibid.*: 29). This 'pragmatic approach' is 'based on … ideas about the transformation of the conditions of poverty by the poor in the long run' (*ibid.*: 29), in contrast to the more familiar project orientation adopted by most approaches to urban change. Not simply a 'politics of utility,' theirs is a 'politics of patience, constructed against the tyranny of the emergency' (*ibid.*: 30).

The Alliance has a transparent and fluid organizational style (*ibid.*: 31) and operates according to certain reiterated principles that are closely related to organizing strategies. These include:

1. The principle of *federation* among pre-existing collectives and networks (*ibid.*: 32). The Alliance itself is a federation and it also participates in the Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI), a 'network that includes federations in fourteen countries on four continents' (*ibid.*: 41). The federations make site visits to each other, which facilitates a horizontal process of seeing, hearing and learning (as opposed to a hierarchical process of teaching and learning, or technology transfer) – the key words here are '*exposure, exploration,* and *options*' and '*speeding up*' the process of innovation (*ibid.*: 41–2). One of the most important functions of site visits is to facilitate criticism and debate. Questions and criticisms raised by a distant partner are instructive and useful, while those raised by a daily and proximate ally are often painful and divisive. So this particular practice of globalization facilitates self-reflection and criticism at the local scale without producing wounds and divisions (*ibid.*: 43).
2. The almost spiritual principle and practice of daily *saving*, undertaken primarily by poor women, making their work 'fundamental to what can be achieved in every other area' (*ibid.*: 33).[5] Identified as the key to the success of the federation model (*ibid.*: 33), poor women sustain the Alliance through practices of the self – self-recognition of their survival capacities as poor women, self-development as citizens, daily recommitment to savings and solidarity.
3. And finally something called *precedent-setting*, which might also be called *instituting*. This third principle is a 'linguistic strategy that turns the survival tactics and experiments of the poor into sites for policy innovations by the state, the city, donor agencies, and other activist organizations' (*ibid.*: 34). Among the most arresting examples are the toilet festivals that inaugurate functioning public toilets and at the same time move what is a daily public act of humiliation and major cause of disease into a scene of 'technical innovation, collective celebration, and carnivalesque play with officials from the state, the World Bank, and middle-class officialdom in general' (*ibid.*: 39). Other strategies that create visibility while repositioning Alliance members in relation to powerful actors include:

   - self-surveying and enumeration, contributing to a politics of self-affirmation as well as giving the Alliance the indispensable

knowledge to influence the housing bureaucracy and policy process in Mumbai (*ibid.*: 36);

- housing exhibitions modelled on the home shows that market high end consumer products to the relatively wealthy – here slum dwellers can see, discuss, critique and have input into the residential construction process that will house them in the future (*ibid.*: 37).

As an organization engaged in the politics of place, the Alliance gives priority to the local level without abandoning other scales of activism and organization. What one might say about the global scale of their activities is that it exists to facilitate success at the local level – rather than being a goal in itself, of becoming global to confront global organizations and structures of power. The horizontal site visits, for example, are often funded by international agencies; this demonstrates to local politicians that the 'poor themselves have cosmopolitan links' (Appadurai, 2002: 42) and renders them more powerful in their local political environments. Even the goal of 'scaling up' that seems most like the left's ambition of organizing global power is understood in terms of what it will do for the local federations – freeing them, for example, from the demands of direct donors or project-oriented funding through constructing an international fund-raising and distribution mechanism (*ibid.*: 42).

In understanding the challenges it faces, the Alliance avoids theorizing a global scale or apparatus of power that must be addressed and transformed for its activities to be successful. The federation's efforts are seen as successful in themselves, not as preliminary to a larger, more thoroughgoing global transformation. Although they are redefining 'what governance and governmentality can mean' on both the national and international levels (*ibid.*: 44), that effort is not undertaken in the face of a supreme or conclusive instance of sovereignty (like Empire). Rather, it is grounded in the governmental practice of creating 'precedent-setting' *ad hoc* partnerships with the dispersed powers of state agencies and NGOs (*ibid.*: 44). The Alliance could be seen as refusing to root their poverty in any ultimate origin (such as capitalism or Empire) that might displace their antagonism from poverty itself. As such, theirs is a political and ethical practice of theory, a theoretical form of 'voluntary simplicity'.

In pursuing their many associations with others, the Alliance refuses the vision of inevitable cooptation or contamination that haunts political organizations, whether they are working with and beholden to governments and international agencies, or collaborating with NGO partners and associates who may not share their 'moral goals' (*ibid.*: 44). What animates their practice instead is a sense of continual risk, a requirement of frequent self-criticism and intense internal debates that constitute an actual practice of freedom (*ibid.*: 30). For the Alliance, cooptation and containment are not necessary features of local or place-based movements, as they are for Hardt and Negri. Rather they constitute an ever-present danger that requires vigilant practices of 'not being coopted'.

Finally, the Alliance has pursued (re)subjectivation as an aspect of transformative politics. Whereas Hardt and Negri are left with the unanswered question of 'how the multitude can become a *political subject* in the context of Empire' (a question that seems unwittingly to acknowledge the formidable political obstacles posed by their theoretical project), the Alliance has developed actual practices for producing politicized subjects in place. They are engaged in a daily and deliberate politics of becoming, creating not only housing but also the subjects who can build, inhabit and reproduce that housing in a politicized social space.

## Politics of empire/politics of place

*Empire* and 'Deep Democracy' exemplify two distinct political imaginaries that are nonetheless overlapping, although the nature of the overlap has changed over time. The first of these imaginaries involves the familiar vision of global structural and economic transformation that has been given the name of 'revolutionary' politics. The universality claimed for this politics is grounded in the embracing spatiality of capitalism (conceived as a worldwide system of economy) and the national or supranational sovereignty that exhaustively

partitions the global terrain. From the perspective of this universality, everything else is particular, contained. The spatiality of this sort of politics is hierarchical, global, massive, organized. Its temporality offers the appropriate moment and the millennium.

While *Empire* powerfully revises and updates the revolutionary political template,[6] Appadurai seems to tap into an alternative 'feminine' political imaginary. The Alliance does not need defending in terms of its contribution or connection to an overarching political struggle carried out by a unified collectivity. There is no millennial organization or subject to call into being, no need to address at the 'same level of totality' an ultimate (economic?) instance of power and no system to be overthrown or cast aside before a new world can begin. What there is instead is a continual struggle to transform subjects and places and conditions of life under circumstances of difficulty and uncertainty. The universality to which this politics addresses itself is negatively grounded – in the openness of subjects, their potential to become, their partial freedom from fixity. The spatiality of this sort of politics is ubiquitous, punctiform, scattered, connected semiotically. Its temporality is of the everyday and the continuum.

What I sense at the moment is not the demise of one political imaginary and its replacement by another but a change in the nature of the overlap between the two forms of politics. In the past, revolutionary politics was the universal political form – in the sense that other (local and identity) politics were seen as subsumed within its space, or measured against its norm and evaluated as reformist, distracting or ultimately ineffectual. Now, however, a new understanding of politics has become universal or generic, rendering the revolutionary politics of Empire a special case. Increasingly, it seems, politics is seen as involving a process of *subjectivation* – a process in which new individual and collective identifications are consolidated as the basis for and outcome of novel thoughts, acts and organizations. The decisive role of the subject has become the zone of overlap between the hegemonic politics of radical democracy, the millennial politics of *Empire*, the Foucaultian micro-politics of William Connolly, the performative queer politics of Judith Butler and the feminist politics of place. This new vision of politics does not exclude a politics grounded in the idea of a centralized or globalized structure of power, but it does not cede the terrain of transformative politics to that conception alone. Recognizing this has emboldened me to theorize the feminist politics of place as embodying an alternative 'revolutionary' imaginary, grounded in the ubiquity of its subjects and the transformative changes that new identifications can produce.

## An emerging political vision

When I first became involved in the WPP project, I struggled to understand what the terms of the project could possibly mean. Why were 'women' in the place of the subject? Why was 'place' in the place of society or community? What kind of politics might this be? These were the unanswered questions that attached me to the project and brought me to this paper.

The question 'why women?' yielded most easily. I sensed that WPP not only explicitly affirmed actual women but also implicitly affirmed a new universal – woman as the figure of the political subject. To the extent that the figure of woman signals unfixed or incomplete identity, she is the subject to be constructed through politics. She is the subject of becoming, whose failed identity stands for the possibility of politics itself.[7]

Place was much harder to locate. At first all I could see was the specificity, the daily–ness and groundedness – what might be called the positivities of place – and the corresponding value on locality. Over time, though, other meanings of place seeped into my awareness and ushered me more fully into an emerging political imaginary. Here place became that which is not fully yoked into a system of meaning, not entirely subsumed to and defined within a (global) order; it is that aspect of every site that exists as potentiality. Place is the 'event in space', operating as a 'dislocation' with respect to familiar structures and narratives. It is the eruption of the Lacanian 'real', a disruptive materiality. It is the unmapped and unmoored that allows for new moorings and mappings.

Place, like the subject, is the site of becoming, the opening for politics.

But what kind of politics might this be? In this paper, I have explored two alternative spatial imaginaries, or two different visions of political space. In one, there is organized or 'blanket' control over space (so every place is a place within or under); space is the continuous space of dominion (Empire). In the other, places are scattered and control may or may not successfully enrol and harness them; space is both complexly differentiated and discontinuous. Latour invokes both these visions and our possibilities of shifting between them in his depiction of IBM and of capitalism as either endowed with the 'omniscience and omnipotence that follows from the illusion of controlling spaces' or, alternatively and preferably for him, a 'series of local interactions' (Dirlik, 2001: 25).

In the imperial spatialization, true politics will necessarily involve defeating and replacing the global power structure; anything short of this is reformist or coopted because it is contained within the global space of sovereignty. In the place-based spatialization, every place is to some extent 'outside' the various spaces of control; places change imitatively, partially, multidirectionally, sequentially; space is transformed via changes in place.

Another and perhaps very different way to express this: not as two alternative spatial imaginaries but as two different orientations to transformative politics. The former (masculine) orientation starts with something embracing like Empire. It starts with a positivity, more or less exhaustively theorized and depicted, which it is the project of politics to dismantle and replace. This gives it a millennial quality. The latter (feminine) orientation starts with a negativity, the Lacanian 'real'[8] of disarticulated places and empty subjects, and the practice of politics involves articulation and subjectivation. Politics in this vision is an ethical practice of becoming. Place is not a local specificity (or not that alone) but the aspect of potentiality, and the subject is not an identity but the space of identification. For Gibson-Graham (1996), for example, places always fail to be fully capitalist, and herein lies their potential to become something other. Individuals and collectivities always fall short of full capitalist identity, and this lack is their availability to a different economic subjectivity.[9] From this perspective, Women and the Politics of Place is not simply a potential or actual movement but an alternative logic of politics, one that invests in what is to become, not in what is to be replaced.

**Acknowledgements**

I am very grateful to the students in Julie Graham's advanced graduate seminar for their insightful and collaborative comments: Ken Byrne, Kenan Ercel, Stephen Healy, Yahya Madra, Ceren Oszelcuk, Joe Rebello, Maliha Safri, Chizu Sato, Peter Tamas, Barbara Woloch. I am also deeply indebted to Arturo Escobar, Wendy Harcourt and the other members of the WPP project for their feedback and support. Thank you all.

**Notes**

1 Founded by Arturo Escobar and Wendy Harcourt, the WPP project involves more than 20 feminist activists and academics around the world.

2 All of these diverse forms of labour are in some way subject to capitalist discipline and capitalist relations of production. This fact of being within capital and sustaining capital is what defines the proletariat as a class' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 53), as 'the multitude of exploited and subjugated producers' (*ibid*: 394).

3 See Deleuze (1995) on societies of control.

4 What stands out in the text as (updated and postmodernized) Marxism are the real subsumption of labour by capital, that is, labour becoming a form of capital, by virtue of which it gains a privileged political role as the transformer of the capitalist world order (although the contemporary proletariat/multitude is not an exclusive class category since it includes all labour); the reworked distinction between a class in itself and a class for itself, and the collateral question of how a class created by capitalism becomes a collective subject that makes the world anew; the progressive role of capitalism in bringing us to the point of social and economic transformation ('capitalism digs its own grave' in Žižek, (2000) paraphrase of Marx), the ossified relations of production as a fetter on the generative productive forces (including both process and product technology); the distinction between goods and

services (material and immaterial production) grounding social distinctions, with the hierarchy reversed; the way the economy and the state (here sovereignty) tend to become either indistinguishable or different versions of the same thing; the treatment of capitalism, Empire, or the system as a structural subject with agency, intentions and desires; and, finally, millennialism.

5 And also exemplifying a 'politics *of* if not necessarily *for* women' (see above).

6 See Hardt (2002), for example, for a vision of networking replacing older revolutionary organizational forms.

7 In other words, she is the Lacanian 'subject of lack', 'the empty place of the structure' that Zizek (1990: 251) brought to Laclau and Mouffe's project of radical democracy.

8 This is the pre-symbolic in Madra and Oszelcuk (2003).

9 For us, place signifies the possibility of understanding local economies as *places* withhighly specific economic identities and capacities rather than simply as *nodes* in a global capitalist system. It also suggests the new *place* of the local economic subject – as subject rather than object of development, agent rather than victim of economy. The language of place resonates with our ongoing attempts to bring into view the diversity of economic practices, to make visible the hidden and alternative economic activities that can be found everywhere. If we can begin to see these largely non-capitalist activities as prevalent and viable, we may be encouraged to build upon them actively to transform our local economies (Community Economies Collective, 2001; www.communityeconomies.org).

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