This year’s summer Institute on Culture and Society, the spirited annual gathering of the Marxist Literary Group (MLG), featured an intensive week of intellectual exchange and political engagement, bringing together radical scholars and critics, students, teachers, and activists, from across the United States, Canada, and beyond. Founded in 1969, the MLG is a member organization of the Modern Language Association (MLA), and is committed to supporting and expanding the reach of Marxist theory within the disciplines of literary and cultural studies, and in the humanities more generally. While not as overtly devoted to activism as the MLA’s Radical Caucus, the MLG maintains a lively and supportive email list, and since 1976 has hosted its summer gathering, sometimes affectionately described as “commie camp.”¹ The MLG also produces the journal *Mediations.*²

Among the many fine features of the MLG’s summer Institute is that there are no concurrent panel sessions. This allows for a continuity of discussion that is rare at academic conferences, and facilitates the development of intellectual as well as personal connections between scholars of different disciplines, fields, and generations. Sociologists and geographers sit next to literary scholars who sit next to philosophers and historians; emeritus professors drink beers and debate openly with graduate students late into the night. Six to eight hours

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1. A brief history of the MLG can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxist_Literary_Group
2. *Mediations:* a journal of the *Marxist Literary Group* is available at www.mediationsjournal.org

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of panel sessions surround midday reading groups which delve into classic Marx texts as well as more contemporary theory and scholarship, from Communization Theory to Kevin Anderson’s recent book *Marx at the Margins*.

The wealth of insight and the energy of debate, not to mention the warm bonds of friendship and comradeship that characterized this year’s Institute (held at Ohio State University), extend well beyond what this article can hope to capture. I attempt here to engage just one small snapshot of the event: the last two evening lectures. These spoke, however, to core issues that many Marxists – academics and activists alike – are struggling with. The two hour-long talks came from high-profile American Marxist intellectuals, Michael Hardt (on Thursday night) and Fredric Jameson (on Friday night, to close the conference). Both are authors of many books and countless articles, and have exerted a significant influence on radical thought both within the academy and beyond it. Capping the week of lively panel presentations and ongoing discussions, each speaker offered something of a “big picture” proposal and provocation regarding a question that was on the minds of many: how to conceive communism, and/or revolutionary subjectivity for our times – how to link our understandings of where things are, with where we want them to go, with the question of who or what can take them there. Quite apart from the content of

3. For an introduction to Communization theory and its critics, see *Communization and Its Discontents*, edited by Benjamin Noys, which is available online.

4. See www.MLG2013.wordpress.com for the full program. There was also a lecture given by the perhaps lesser known, but increasingly prominent Bruno Bosteels, author of the insightful new book, *The Activity of Communism* (London: Verso, 2012), which I highly recommend. I will be dealing with the work of Bosteels at some length in a later essay; however, as his MLG talk was more historical than theoretical (it dealt with the history of the commune form in Mexico), I will limit my present discussion to Hardt and Jameson.

5. Hardt recently finished (with Antonio Negri) a major trilogy, encompassing *Empire, Multitude*, and *Commonwealth*. Among Fredric Jameson’s major works are: *Marxism and Form*, *The Political Unconscious*, *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, *A Singular Modernity*, *Valences of the Dialectic*, and, most recently, *Reading Capital*.

6. At this year’s Institute, this perennial Marxist question was weighted by a week of reading, which, in the form of the recently translated German Wertkritik (or “Value Theory”), as well as what has become known as Communization Theory, delved into questions related to the organic composition of capital and the Falling Rate of Profit, as well as what Marx in *Capital* terms the “absolute general tendency of capitalist accumulation,” that is, capital’s tendency to produce an absolutely “surplus” population, characterized by permanent unemployment. In other words: how to conceive of a revolutionary social subject in an age of terminal crisis, characterized by mass unemployment and precarious underemployment.
these closing presentations, which we shall turn to shortly, it seems to me a promising sign that issues of communism (and revolutionary subjectivity more broadly) are on the tongues of so many radical intellectuals in the US today, from so many different disciplines and regions – by which I mean not just the likes of Hardt and Jameson, but the eighty or so people who attended this year’s Institute, many of whom I am proud to call comrades.7

“The ABCs of Communism” with Michael Hardt

For those familiar with his work, Michael Hardt’s MLG talk did not appear to offer much that was new. Nonetheless, the clarity of his presentation makes the speech he gave a useful entry point into analyzing some of his main ideas, ideas which have had significant influence both within and beyond radical academic circles.8 Hardt entitled his talk “The ABCs of Communism” (an allusion to Bukharin’s handbook from the 1920s) and prefaced it as an attempt to explain what he means by the term communism. He positioned his paper against the current of increasingly widespread “talk about communism,” which often, he said, leaves the end goal itself only vaguely defined. In contrast, Hardt argued for understanding communism as an “economic, social, and political proposal” and proceeded to outline his particular conception as consisting of the abolition of four major interrelated institutions of modern life: the abolition of property, the abolition of work, the abolition of the state, and the abolition of the family. Apart from the content of his talk, it was for me a promising sign that a radical thinker such as Hardt was making an attempt to frame his core concepts in a more popular, digestible form. Listening to his lecture, I felt that his discourse was one that most people could grasp and engage, without the need for some specialized training. This cannot always – cannot often – be said of radical theory in the United States today.

7. This is the appropriate place to thank a number of MLG comrades for helpful comments on this essay and/or on the talks in question: Kanishka Chowdhury, Rich Daniels, Ariane Fischer, Kevin Floyd, George Snedeker, and Robert Tally.

8. These ideas have been elaborated in many other places, including “The Common in Communism,” Hardt’s contribution to the volume The Idea of Communism (London: Verso, 2010), as well as his above-cited co-authored trilogy, of which the Commonwealth volume is particularly important for our present purposes. I should add that my present discussion does not purport to be a full or adequate critical survey of Hardt’s (and Negri’s) ambitious critical project, though I do hope to raise here some questions about that project which can be engaged further elsewhere.
Hardt framed his approach to these “4 Abolitions” by emphasizing two more general points of orientation. The first was that while it is all well and good to speak of communism and revolution as “beautiful,” such utopian talk can be one-sided. It is important, he insisted, not to ignore the ways communism may well appear quite “monstrous” to us, at least insofar as we have been formed by and through capitalist society. Communism, he insisted, will mean giving up some of what “we” hold most dear, what gives people today their sense of identity.9

Hardt’s second framing point was that, far from being impossible utopian proposals, each of his four calls for abolition is in fact feasible, in that the “basis” for it “is present already” in contemporary capitalist society. Hardt asserted – and has argued elsewhere, for years – that capitalism is immanently building the basis for communism in its very forms and fibers, creating the foundation for a new society, not just despite itself, but out of its own capitalist logic.

At the outset, it is interesting to compare what we might call Hardt’s “4 Abolitions” with what are sometimes called the “4 Alls” of Communism. According to the Dictionary of Revolutionary Marxism (maintained by Scott Harrison at http://www.massline.org/Dictionary/):

“FOUR ALLS” is the name given by the Chinese during the Mao era to the following four points which concisely and powerfully sum up the essence and meaning of communist revolution:

1) The abolition of class distinctions generally.
2) The abolition of all the relations of production on which they rest.
3) The abolition of all the social relations that correspond to these relations of production.
4) The revolutionizing of all the ideas that result from these social relations.10

It is worth noting the differences, as well as the overlap, between these two conceptions of what communism means and strives for.

For starters, the “4 Alls” makes the primary target of abolition – the one from which all the others follow – the abolition of “all class distinctions.” It’s a heady notion. Here we can intuit the need to abolish

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9. Of course, the “we” and the “us” here were not particularly clear: Was Hardt imagining his audience as a privileged class of tenured and soon-to-be-tenured professors? A class of property-owners whose identities are wrapped up in their possessions? A class of increasingly precarious academic workers struggling to achieve a living wage while drowning in six figures of debt?

10. As Harrison notes, though popularized during the Chinese revolutionary process, “These four points are taken verbatim from a passage in Marx’s pamphlet, The Class Struggles in France (1850), MECW 10:127.
and/or radically transform quite a number of social relations (inside and outside of production): the capital–labor relation (including but not limited to the boss–worker relation), the landlord–peasant (or landlord–tenant) relation, as well as the inequities that are inherent in patriarchal relations and in the realm of imperialism, including national or racial oppression. It is at root a maxim of human equality, of broad applicability.

In contrast, Hardt’s primary target of abolition (from which his other targets follow) is defined as “property.” Not just private property, he emphasized, but property in general. The very notion of property, Hardt claimed, even for instance public property, carries the logic of private property within it: it still hinges on granting a monopoly of force that serves to lock people out and away from access to a particular substance or space. Thus, Hardt opposed what he called (following Marx) “crude communism” that would merely shift control over property from private individuals to the state or some other collective “owning” body. Does Hardt’s placing the accent on property rather than, say, class matter, and how so? What is lost or gained in this reframing?

Hardt challenged listeners to consider the depths to which property logic has permeated our thinking and even experience of individuality and self-hood. He suggested that “Private property makes us stupid,” making us feel that “a thing isn’t ours unless we own it.” One of our challenges in creating communism, he argued, will be to take up theoretically and practically the question, “How can things be ours without our owning them?” Here Hardt usefully echoed the early Marx of the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, emphasizing the need for a total re-education of the senses in order to shed the stupidity and selfishness that private property has bred in human beings.11

Still, juxtaposing Hardt’s “4 Abolitions” with the Maoist “4 Alls” in this way immediately raises a number of questions:

On the one hand, is human equality (the abolition of class) incompatible with the continued existence of property as such?12 Or only incompatible with certain types of property, such as say, capital, or exclusive ownership of fertile land, i.e., property that gives one party

11. See Hardt, “The Common in Communism” (note 8), as well as Marx’s Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844.

12. Of course it could also be asked whether or not the abolition of class alone is adequate to the achievement of human equality. As indicated above, I here take class to encompass without cancelling other unequal and self-replicating power relations involving for instance gender, race, and national inequalities.
power over another, allowing the former to exploit the latter in ways that will accentuate inequalities, empowering some at the expense of others?

On the other hand, is an abolition of property (and “its logic”) as such adequate to the abolition of class inequalities, understood in all their many manifestations? Or are social inequalities produced by capitalism-imperialism embedded in other forms that are related but not reducible to property relations? (To get a bit ahead of ourselves, would communizing or collectivizing property and economic decision-making within the existing structures and places where they now stand be adequate to creating communism, understood as the worldwide abolition of class distinctions? Or, over and above immanent communization, is there a need for a deliberate restructuring of global social relations (and reallocation of resources) in such a way as to fundamentally re-work the parts in relationship to the whole? How, for example, should the historic imbalances produced between global North and South be addressed by a truly communist movement?)

Hardt’s resistance to drawing a line between private property and property per se led one MLG questioner to ask about his shirt, and whether or not he would have an exclusive right to it under communism, as Hardt had described it. Would and should communism allow for (and offer defense of) personal property in the form of possessions, clothes, objects, even a home, etc? And how would such a right be maintained? Didn’t Marx himself make the point (albeit polemically, in the Manifesto, with Engels) that it was capitalism not communism that threatened to appropriate from the great majority of people.

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13. I should add here that, as a comrade recently reminded me, Hardt and Negri do call for the abolition of the class relationship within production in their broader work. For instance, they write, evocatively: “Revolutionary class politics must destroy the structures and institutions of worker subordination and thus abolish the identity of worker itself, setting in motion the production of subjectivity and a process of social and institutional innovation. A revolutionary class politics also does not aim at workers taking power as the new ruling class, and thereby continuing the long history of one social class replacing another in the seat of power. Nor can it aim at creating social equality by universalizing one of the existing class identities, making either everyone bourgeois or everyone proletarian. Each of these non-revolutionary projects leaves worker identity intact, whereas a revolutionary process must abolish it” (Hardt & Negri, Commonwealth, 333).

14. I am thankful to fellow S& D editor Suren Moodliar for pointing out that indeed one can imagine circumstances when one ought not to be entitled to an absolute property right over one’s own shirt: imagine a situation where one person is bleeding and needs another’s shirt for a tourniquet.
what small bits of property they had acquired through their lifelong toil? Hardt appeared rather unclear on this point, perhaps because he is reluctant to admit, or uncertain of how to conceptualize, the body or authority that might enforce such exclusive rights, however “personal.” As we have noted, Hardt calls for the abolition of the state, understood as a coercive entity standing apart from and over society.

As the alternative to both state and market, both public and private property, Hardt proposes the “common,” as a mode of organizing social life that depends, for him, on two criteria: “open and equal access to all” and “democratic collective self-management.” He referred to recent developments in Gezi Park and Taksim Square in Istanbul, Turkey, as well as to the Occupy Wall Street movement, as expressions of an actually existing “aspiration to the common” that is resistant to both state and market forms, “anti-neoliberal, and yet not pro-state.” Admitting the weaknesses and frustrations (as well as the beauty) of experiments such as Occupy, Hardt emphasized their value as learning experiences aimed at discovering and developing the methods and forms by which people can exercise democratic self-management. In this view, those struggling to find the best methods of facilitating General Assemblies might be seen as a kind of vanguard of the movement for the commons. Fair enough.

But with Occupy still spinning in my head, the big question for me as Hardt spoke was: Can this notion of the commons be scaled up beyond the local? Don’t we need to attend to the roll-back and break-up of Occupy as well as its spectacular moment of growth?15 As someone who dove into this event, who brought clothes, food, and books down to Occupy Boston, and who sought to work with and through the General Assembly and in working-groups in all sorts of ways, I still must ask: Is it conceptually valid, let alone logistically feasible, to manage entire societies, up to the national and the international level, as commons in this immediate sense? Without the support and supplement of something like large state structures?16 Without delegating at least

16. More workable (and dialectical) might be the formulations of David Harvey, who in his recent book, Rebel Cities, argues for a more inter-penetrative relationship between state structures of maintaining public spaces and rights, and grassroots structures committed to “communing.”
temporary authority to some sort of elected leadership? Without even a centrally coordinated transition (call it ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat,’ ‘socialism,’ the ‘first stage of communism,’ or something else altogether)?\textsuperscript{17}

Complicating the matter further is the fact that Hardt argues that political “representation” itself is a suspect, “property-based concept,” whereby the political will of one person is transferred to another (as if it were currency). Hardt didn’t quite call for the “abolition” of the idea of political representation, but he seemed to be leaning in that direction. It’s interesting to reflect on such commonplace notions, but it’s also risky to problematize them as such insofar as “representation” is a term that can stand for any number of ways and means of representing people, their decisions, their interests, preferences, desires, and ideas. For example, just looking at current and mainstream political practices, it is not only common for the transfer of group authority to be made \textit{temporary} (from term limits on elected officials, to one convention only delegations), but it is also possible (and not uncommon) for elected “representatives” to be \textit{recalled} by their constituents. Similarly, it is possible to subject representatives’ decisions to popular vetoes in the form of \textit{referenda}, before they are implemented.\textsuperscript{18}

Admittedly, Hardt does here point out a real cultural trend (and danger) of treating political will as an alienable property; such a notion of consent as transferrable currency certainly can be (and has been) exploited by leaders who are on their way to becoming a detached, bureaucratic elite. In our present ‘mainstream’ environment of cynical voter-resignation, in particular, \textit{we do} need to insist that no amount of having voted for a politician or a party can deprive the people of their right to have a further say in their situation, even and especially when it means challenging those who officially ‘represent’ them; people cannot delegate away their political will. (Similarly,

\textsuperscript{17} As noted above, a discussion of the work of MLG’s other guest speaker, Bruno Bosteels, is beyond the scope of this essay. (It is in production.) That said, I will note here in passing that one of the important features of Bosteels’s recent work, for instance in \textit{The Actuality of Communism}, is his methodological and political insistence that we study the relationship between communist movement and socialist state with more rigor (and internationalism) than has become customary on the anti-statist/communist left.

\textsuperscript{18} We should add that each of these “checks and balances” on representatives’ authority can be and has been used for ill as well as for good; consider for instance various anti-gay or anti-immigrant referenda that have swept regions of the country in recent years. Greater limitation on authority does not always mean greater liberation for the people.
people ought not to feel bound to obey laws that are unjust and oppressive, just because they are formally legitimate.)

But valuable as it may be as a means of disrupting or delegitimizing the existing electoral-capitalist complacency, is this anti-representational principle fit to structure the realm of revolutionary politics? Does it apply to the realm of communism, where presumably the dictatorship of capital (or, as Hardt would put it, property) is overcome? One could raise a similar question regarding some of the autonomist modes of workers organizing against or without managers: Is the logic of resistance co-extensive with the necessities of revolutionary struggle? Or do these two form a more diagonal, at times contradictory mix, requiring serious mediation? (We will return to this below.) More immediately, how useful is such an anti-concept in this moment where radical forces are struggling to coalesce into a more substantial and effective political body? It seems to me that an outright hostility to the very concept of political representation (to even temporary and provisional delegations of collective political will) can become a debilitating bias indeed – unless it is replaced with another concept that does the work of representation in a new and better – more accountable, more organically mass-responsive – way.19

Those who experienced the General Assemblies (GA) of Occupy for an extended period likely got to see first-hand not just the prefigurative beauty of an aspiration for the common, but also what Jodi Dean (among others) has criticized as a reluctance or inability to confront and to work through its own internal political divisions.20 Interestingly, at least in Boston, Occupy’s horizontal processes appeared to function best in moments when there was a clear and present danger against which to unite: especially the imminent threat of police attack. Nonetheless, based on the Occupy experience, I believe that we should be skeptical of the notion that a revolutionary movement, or a new communist society, can do without some forms of representation and/or strategic delegation of authority, to facilitate decision-making in times of sudden and unforeseen crisis, to help the collective keep focus during lull phases, to push the group to work through its own internal contradictions in a non-antagonistic way, to facilitate coordination with other communes or occupations elsewhere, as well as to help work through the contradictions and challenges immanent

19. Here we might consider Hardt and Negri’s treatment of the concept of sovereignty, a concept which did not come up in this MLG talk.
20. See the last chapter of Dean’s book, The Communist Horizon; also, my article on and interview with Dean in Socialism and Democracy 62 (vol. 27, no. 2).
to the movement and moment. To hypothesize bluntly: If every major Occupation had elected a team of (temporary! recallable!) delegates – say one month in, in October, 2011 – we very well might have been able to raise our movement to a higher level, for instance by organizing a representative national convergence that could have brought focus, visibility, and sustainability to the historic upsurge, coordinating actions across cities and regions, drawing new forces into the national movement, while also providing a clear platform for the open struggle between contending political views and approaches. This might have been a significant step forward for the Occupy movement, creating new opportunities, as well as – of course! – challenges, and yes, new dangers, too. That this didn’t happen was not primarily because of police repression: anti-representational biases played a role in stymying the coalescence, concentration, and self-clarification and expansion, of the Occupy movement.21

Of course, it goes without saying – but still must be said – that to keep such representatives and leaders responsive, accountable, and connected to the needs and wants of the people needs to be an ongoing priority of any movement for radical change; similarly all such official representations remain subject to amendment and critique. Part of this task involves the cultivation of new leaders – quite apart from whether they hold officially “representative” positions or

21. In Boston I saw first-hand how the suspicion of representation held up the process of expanding the movement. In the very first week of the Occupation at Dewey Square, I was involved with several others in crafting a formal “Declaration of Occupation.” Written by a small committee, but based on dozens if not hundreds of conversations with other occupiers, the Declaration was concise but comprehensive, and consisted of a compilation of principles and grievances, as well as a welcoming call for other people in the Greater Boston area to participate in the movement, in whatever ways they could. We were convinced that if we passed such a statement through the GA we would be able to get it picked up in the local papers, The Boston Globe, The Boston Metro, The Boston Herald, etc. We sought to strike while the iron was hot. The Declaration was stopped twice at General Assembly, not because of particular concerns with its contents – almost everyone appeared to agree with it and found it well written, and the small changes proposed could have been easily implemented. Rather it was blocked because some – very few – in the Assembly expressed concerns: (1) that the authors of the statement were not (demographically) representative of the people as a whole; (2) that we should not issue a statement that claimed to be representative (of the 99%) when we, the occupation, were still only a tiny fraction of that 99%. Thus, I would contend, tens perhaps hundreds of thousands of Bostonians who might have been able to get a clear and direct, concise, coherent, and perhaps even moving “official” statement from Occupy Boston did not get one, because a small minority of Occupiers were essentially hostile to the idea of anything akin to formal representation.
not – so that the movement does not become vulnerable (whether to distortion or to repression) in its over-reliance and dependence on particular individuals. Indeed, one of the best criteria for judging the effectiveness of revolutionary leadership – or of a mode of movement representation – should be the extent to which a particular representative (or representative mode) is able to cultivate and to raise up the consciousness and confidence of others. In a sense such leadership ought to strive to make itself obsolete, by spreading whatever skills and knowledge and methods it once had privileged access to, and by helping to cultivate the space and support for new and needed voices and views to come forward.

It is obvious that we need to be exploring and testing new forms of leadership and new ways of manifesting and concentrating the best ideas and practices of the people, on an ongoing basis. But does dispensing with “representation” as such (as Hardt suggested we might) help us to make progress on such problems, problems that are themselves, in part, matters of representation? How do we conceive of leadership (or popular will, or sovereignty) here if not in terms of representation? What can and what will be the mode of leadership and organization through which the rule of the common can be generalized beyond the local and the immediate? Perhaps what we need is a more dynamic, dialectical, and supple understanding of what it means to represent others politically in a communist way, rather than a hostility or resistance to the concept of representation as such.

Lacking answers here, it seems to me that Hardt’s anti-representationalism is symptomatic of a broader tendency (on the Left and perhaps elsewhere) to seek out a novel form of political organization or expression, as if said form could be somehow sealed off in advance from the danger of co-optation, corruption, elitist detachment, or bureaucratic abuse. As if the selection of form can get us around the need for an all-sided and ongoing struggle over content. As if even the commune too couldn’t make bad decisions, take wrong stances, pursue incorrect paths.

22. See the substantive discussions on political representation and organizational form that have appeared on the Kasama Project website, e.g., Mike Ely’s writings, including “Unsettled Questions of Communist Organization,” http://kasamaarchive.org/2012/01/25/unsettled-questions-of-communist-organization/
Communism with no place for the State...or strategy

As for how the commoning of economic relations and the abolition of property (private or public) will be accomplished, Hardt tended to avoid the question of strategy. He did emphasize two points relevant to the question of communist transition. But both of these points were not just non- but anti-strategic, gravitating against the need for carving out a definitive revolutionary strategy, or even making the space for one.

First, Hardt argued that the transition to communism is already immanent within contemporary capitalism, which, he argued, is increasingly characterized by common and collective forms of production. “It is more efficient to give workers autonomy,” Hardt argued, and so capitalists’ own drive for profit is leading them to expand autonomy, creating the material basis for the common, and rendering capitalists more external to the actual process of production.

Second, he pointed out that his theory of communist transition is less a matter of “cataclysmic change” than of what he called “an accumulation of anomalies,” a gradual production of “beachheads” within capitalism that will aggregate until “quantitative change turns into qualitative change.” This more or less spontaneous communism by enclave, Hardt quickly added, need not be understood as ruling out the possibility of more “cataclysmic” events; indeed, the growing commons might even help provide support for such breakthroughs. And yet, despite this important qualification, Hardt’s approach tends to downplay and to put off the need for strategic thinking and organization - whether proactive or defensive. His presentation risked sounding like a call to tail the spontaneous emergence of the common as immanent to capital.\(^\text{23}\)

Hardt did not, for instance, encourage us, as strategically oriented communists, to approach the accumulated anomalies and enclaves in light of the opportunity for - or even the political-logicial necessity of - revolutionary “cataclysms,” or for that matter, of assault from counter-revolutionaries. He did not insist that we think strategically when creating or selecting which commons to expand or prioritize, depending on where the enemy is weak or strong. Though he never

\(^{23}\) We should note also that the status, trajectory, or scope of such proto-autonomist labor commons within capital is far from being uncontroversial. Nor is the significance for political subjectivity of such developments clear. See for instance Jason Read’s discussion of the persistence and intensification of fetishism in relation to cooperation under capital: http://www.unemployednegativity.com/2011/03/general-intellect-personified-more.html
exactly said it (at least not in this talk), one could be forgiven for interpre-
ting Hardt as suggesting that the logic of capitalism, and the flower-
ing of democratic self-management in those common spaces that capital is itself creating, will take care of this transitional process on its own.

But from a strategic standpoint, wouldn’t it make sense to cluster one’s “beachheads” with an eye to where the enemy guns are? And to strategize how to defend and reconfigure the “anomalies” in light of the likelihood of counter-revolutionary attack? Whether or not we accept Hardt’s political economic assumptions, such a strategic approach to the revealed terrain would appear necessary for communists, no?\footnote{It should be noted, however, that Hardt’s (and Negri’s) call to take the sudden emergence of such beachheads seriously, is to be much preferred to the approach of those who would dismiss such enclaves out of hand, as somehow out of step with classical or properly Marxist models of politics.}

It seems possible that Hardt’s focus on \textit{property} rather than \textit{class} as the primary target for abolition, may encourage this eliding of strategy. It was as if abolishing property, and going right to the commune form, would do away with the need to struggle with and among the people, consciously exposing and transforming the particular social relations and contradictions that have been built up in the world system by capitalist and imperialist domination, not to mention the need to actively defend communist enclaves from the repressive force of capital and the state. In a way, Hardt thus defers a whole host of tough questions to the democratic decision-making of the emergent and future common, rather than insisting on the need for communists to be preparing now to take on various manifestations of class inequalities, such as educational hierarchies, divisions between mental and manual labor, divisions between country and city within countries, as well parasitism and lopsidedness between countries resulting from centuries of colonialism and imperialism. The danger for Hardt’s property-based proposal is, like the danger of a certain brand of anarchism, that its very sweeping “radicalism” ignores the political particularities of transition and transformation that will be essential to any viable communist revolutionary project. In short, the entire problematic of the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” of the need to lay the basis for higher forms of communism and to defeat and suppress the oppressors, does not appear.\footnote{During the Q and A, Hardt did concede that there could be some role for the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in his notion of communism, namely as the “instilling of new habits” among the people.}
“What are the people doing?”…and “what is to be done?”

Neither communists, nor anyone else, of course, can conjure the resistant or revolutionary practice of the people into being through a sheer act of will (coupled with correct analysis + strategic utterances). Thus perhaps the single most useful point and phrase that I took away from Hardt’s “ABCs of Communism” talk was his insistence that rather than simply obsessing over “What is to be done?” communists need to take seriously the question “What are people doing?” As a provocation both for a certain Leninist left that tends to marginalize itself with its insistence on abstract and historically enervated notions of the “correct” way forward, and for an economistic Marxism that in its exploration of tectonic capital shifts tends to lose sight of the actually existing practices of actual people, Hardt’s emphasis on investigating the concrete doings of the people was valuable.

But despite the importance of taking seriously the changes in the work life and the social life of the people, Hardt’s maxim risked being one-sided in the other direction. He risked leaping from a dogmatism of the orthodox abstract to a tailism of the spontaneously emergent.

The challenge, it seems to me, is precisely to derive a strategy of what is to be done, in relationship to what people are doing (as well as to what is coming down the pike courtesy of contemporary capitalism and its various attendant internal and external conflicts). This needs to be understood not as a mechanical operation, where one aspect (“What is to be done” or “What people are doing”) is fully formed “in advance,” and then acts upon the other aspect, but as a process of mutual transformation of both poles of the opposition, of both revolutionaries and (the rest of) the people, whereby what people are doing is changed in relation to growing awareness about what is to be done, and where our sense of what is to be, can be, and must be done is revised and filled out by a deepening and concretized sense not just of what the people are doing, but of what they are willing and able and wanting to do (which may often be different from what they are at present doing). The latter itself needs to be understood as a dynamic, dialectically determined subjective will – for what people are willing and thus able do has a way of changing, sometimes drastically and radically, in relation to what they understand others to be doing, to be thinking, to be wanting and willing. (“From the masses, to the masses,” as the Maoist “mass line” would put it, needs to be understood as a mutually transformative process.) Investigation into the practices, conditions, and attitudes of the people is absolutely fundamental, but this is not a strictly
sociological or positivist matter of “knowledge”: such investigation needs to be conducted, and then translated and tested through practice, in light of a broader view of the strategic situation, a view which includes subjective political factors, as well as overall tectonic alignments of capital that are beyond the people’s immediate control. *Such a truly radical investigation changes the object as well as the subject.*

Our question thus shifts again: **Not just What is to be done? or What is being done? But what can be done? And how can this collective sense of possibility itself be transformed?**

**How to approach a contradictory institution: abolish the family...or emancipate it?**

Against the Maoist “4 Alls,” Hardt’s “4 Abolitions” offer the advantage but also the disadvantage of being somewhat more specific, immediate, and provocative. Thus, rather than calling for the abolition and revolutionizing of *all the social relations and ideas* that reproduce class distinctions – an admittedly abstract notion, but one that immediately demands close interpretation and supple application in a myriad of diverse social contexts – Hardt calls for the abolition of the Family, Work, and the State. *His more targeted approach, however, though seemingly more clear and concrete, has a number of intellectual and strategic downsides.*

First, it runs the risk of ruling out in an a priori and mechanical fashion the communist possibility that oppressive social relations may be abolished *within and across* particular social forms (such as the Family, or even within a new kind of State) without necessarily abolishing these social forms as such. Hardt risks conflating a social form – such as the Family – with the *function made* of that form by and under the rule of capital. That is to say, mightn’t it be possible to wage a communist struggle *within* the Family (as well as between/across families) in addition to, and/or rather than simply struggle *against* it? A comrade of mine recently reframed the question as the need to abolish the place of the “Father” (as effective “subcontractor” for Capital and the State) within the family, a framing that foregrounds

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26. See www.massline.info (maintained by Scott Harrison) as well as discussions of the mass line at www.kasamaproject.org. I see here connections also to the emerging work of Peter Hallward regarding what he has called a “Dialectical Voluntarism.” See his “Communism of the Intellect, Communism of the Will,” in *The Idea of Communism.*

27. He said much more about the first and last than he did about the second.
the possibility and necessity of struggle inside and not just versus the family form.28

As Marxist feminist scholar-critic Julie Torrant has discussed insightfully in her recent book, *The Material Family* (Sense Publishers, 2010), Family needs to be understood – like just about everything under capitalism – as a class phenomenon, subject to (and object of) class struggle. That is to say, the Family occupies a drastically different position and fulfills fundamentally different functions for working-class people than it does for members of the owning classes.29 For the latter, the Family is chiefly a means of apportioning surplus value and adjudicating property rights, through laws of inheritance, etc. For the former, the Family is central to the reproduction of labor power, but also, historically and presently, to the provisioning of social care for those unable to provide for themselves through the market (including children, the sick, and the elderly) – areas from which the neoliberal state has increasingly retreated, leaving working-class people to fend for themselves. It seems quite obvious and necessary that the abolition of (private) property would mean the abolition of private inheritance, meaning that the major function of the Family for the owning classes would be obliterated – and good riddance.

But is the same true for working-class families? Isn’t it often the case that such family structures – with all of their many faults, the persistence of patriarchal domination in many quarters being the biggest – still manage to provide (some) people (including children) with a rare if not unique (and often pre-formative) experience of something like the communist ethos of “from each according to ability, to each according to need”? Doesn’t the ethos and experience of family life (in some families at least) have a semi-autonomy that makes it more than a mere instrument of capitalist social reproduction, but also a site of potential (and actual) resistance, a social support (and an ideological counterpoint) for people in the face of capital? Isn’t the exploitation of capital often experienced by working-class families as a threat to Family life itself?

As Torrant shows, contemporary capitalist exploitation, particularly expressed through the lengthening of the family work-day (with most working-class households now depending on two-wage

28. We should add that this “Father-subcontractor” role can in principle be played by one or more household head, regardless of their sex or gender status.
29. It is also to say that within a particular class location the Family is often a site of struggle between contending forces and tendencies.
earners, each logging longer and longer hours to make up for stagnant or declining hourly wages, even as worker productivity continues to rise and rise) is producing a full-blown crisis of working-class social reproduction, as working-class people, and especially working-class women, struggle to find the time and energy to provide for the needs of family members on top of the burdens of wage labor. This is to say that capitalism, by imposing ever longer hours of work, is often experienced by workers as a force that bars them from being able to provide the care that their family members need, a force which undermines the possibility of realizing potentials that family ideology conjures.

Thus, as easy as it may be to debunk the notion of the Family as “the haven in a heartless world”30 – and as important as it is to support women’s struggle for equality and against patriarchal domination within and against oppressive Family relations – we should not rest with such debunking. Insofar as Family as practice of care has purchase in the experiences and aspirations of working-class people, and insofar as this practice is coming under assault by capital, it has both material reality and resistant potential. This is to say that, insofar as the family is still experienced as a (frustrated) site of mutuality, care, and need, one that is compromised and threatened, but not yet fully subsumed by capitalist forces, to that extent Hardt’s call for the “Abolition of the Family” (however well intended) runs the danger of one-sidedness. Mightn’t we speak of the “Liberation” of the Family from the domination of Capital? Or even, the Universalization of the proletarian Family code of taking care of those in need, so that it includes those traditionally excluded from it?31

I recall a college professor of mine giving a successful lecture where he exposed the limits of bourgeois ideology regarding “the inherent selfishness and greediness of human nature” by discussing the sharing that takes place in families, specifically around what he

30. It is similarly easy – all-too-easy – to “debunk” religion or religious belief, in ways that fail to take seriously (and dialectically!) the emotional and symbolic investments and experiences of actually existing people, including the potentially (but by no means guaranteed) resistant aspects of these practices and ideas with respect to capital.

31. Of course, I am not advocating that we universalize in this manner. The way to frame and grasp the transformation of particular family relations needs to be closely attuned to the particular social and political contexts in which struggle and study are taking place. My point in challenging Hardt’s rather sweeping call for abolition is precisely to insist on the existence and the importance of such particularities in light of these highlighted contradictions.
called the “family refrigerator.”32 We explored the illuminating fact that – even under the dominance of neoliberal capitalism – people in families share food (among others things). We discussed how any family member who would steal from the fridge, locking away food from other family-members (let alone daring to sell it back to them!), would be seen instantly as a kind of criminal, a monster, a social misfit – someone in need of re-education, of censure – a spanking. It was a persuasive example to members of the class: the family fridge as an actually existing common. Admittedly this audience was a middle-class to wealthy university audience – but for this very reason, it was an audience resistant to the idea that communist ethics could be actualized at all. Family life provided them with a real world exception to the seemingly totalitarian rule of capitalist individualism.

Ever since, I have wondered why we could not find ways to extend the “family refrigerator” ethos beyond the home, to the neighborhood, the city, the region, the nation, the world. At the very least, in this age of capitalist cynicism, the family fridge provides a welcome crack in the ideological armor of the ruling order. With strangers and new friends I sometimes frame the idea of a communist world as one in which we would treat all other human beings on earth as, if not our siblings, then at least our distant cousins (which, in a certain biogenetic sense, of course, we are!). This would be a world where all in need would be seen and treated as a kind of kin, where all would have a right to the “family fridge” – so long as they don’t attempt to appropriate it from the rest of the human family. We should add further that the flip side of this communist ethos of “to each according to need” is, of course, “from each according to ability,” which is to say: people should not view the family refrigerator as a common only when it comes to taking, but when it comes to giving as well. Keeping the fridge full is the obligation of each and all.33

32. He juxtaposed the behavioral norms associated with the “family refrigerator” with those more competitive and cut-throat individualist ethics of the television show, “Super Market Sweepstakes,” wherein two contestants are paired against one another and given one minute to pile as much dollar value of food in their shopping cart as possible in the allotted time; only the one with the most dollar value gets to keep the booty.

33. I don’t mean to imply that this mutual obligation is a harmonious state. As a comrade recently reminded me, competing interpretations of this obligation can result in intense and often damaging conflict (and even coercion) from both sides of the parent–child relationship, as well as between parental figures.
But Hardt, at least in his MLG talk, prompted us in the other direction, asking us to scrutinize the way in which the Family metaphor has crept into “even” our discourses of solidarity – comrades calling one another “Brother” and “Sister” – as if this family metaphor was the problem to be tackled. Where he sees a problem, however, is there not also an opportunity? Certainly we should seek out, cultivate, and defend other forms and spaces of collectivity, solidarity, and mutuality. And certainly the ideology of normative and individualizing, pathologizing “Family Values” in America today does great harm to individuals, couples, families, and communities alike, especially but not only to women. But why rule out the contribution that a radicalized, egalitarian, inclusive sense of Family could play in this broader revolutionary mix? Why cede the contested terrain of the Family to the enemy? Why declare war on a social space where many people get an actually existing taste of a communist ethos of “from each, to each” in accordance with human ability and need?

Hardt certainly did raise a number of important points in terms of how Family as a regulative ideal exerts destructive and antisocial pressure on people. Family certainly can serve as a site of psychic and social repression, as well as a site of violence, vulnerability, and persistent inequality; moreover, for tens of millions of women in the United States alone it is a site of a burdensome “second shift” of household work. The idea of making the family “less necessary for personal security and care,” presumably by developing alternate ways of making care and support available to people, is unassailable. Establishing free universal healthcare, childcare, shelter and a shame-free welfare system of minimum guaranteed income would all have dramatic effects on how we relate to Family, reducing the extent to which people are compelled into family relations for reasons of brute necessity, allowing people to make freer choices about who to live with, care for, and love. But the flat call for the “abolition” of the family seems a bit one-sided, even, out of touch. To put it bluntly: many people care about and care for their families, and communists ought not to dismiss or disrespect that,

34. Here it would be worth exploring the lone example that Hardt provided where people have had the family forcibly abolished: that being the experience of African Americans in the US under slavery. To what extent did the dissolution of these family bonds constitute liberation of the enslaved population? To what extent an additional form of oppression and domination? What lessons, if any, are to be drawn from the brutalization and the resistance of African Americans in the face of slaver class attempts to break their family bonds? Although I have not investigated this matter fully, I suggest that fleshing it out would gravitate against Comrade Hardt’s one-sided position.
even while taking the struggles going on within (and against) families very seriously. Indeed, it may be the case that taking the utopian promise and resistant potential of the Family seriously is the premise upon which such struggle and solidarity can and must be based.

Of New Love. . .and communist monstrosities

At the end of his talk on “The ABCs of Communism,” as if to replace the newly abolished Family, Michael Hardt referenced the need for a “New Love” or a “Love of the Common.” He did not provide much in the way of content to fill out this idea (perhaps due to time constraints), but it would seem that this notion must be read dialectically in response to what, in his account, communism threatens to strip from people. The “new love” then would be a kind of communal cultural production that is outside the logic of Property, Work, State, and Family but that can provide the sense of security and belonging that communism, as abolition of these realms, jeopardizes. (I was reminded of Jodi Dean’s notion of communism as “the collective desire for collectivity” or the “collective desire for collective desiring” which seems to be emphasizing a similar sort of need, a kind of libidinal drive to maintain – and expand – the very space of collective being and decision, though Hardt made no mention of Dean’s work in his talk.)

What would be the form, the contents, the methods of producing and reproducing this “new love of the common”? Is this too something that – like Hardt’s “beachheads” of the common – can be understood as immanent to capitalist production, or is it something that can only come into being through an act of collective will, a type of communist cultural revolution?

Certainly this communist need to create a sense of security and belonging is a real one. How will we hold together a society that can no longer depend on greed, fear, nationalism, or narrowly understood “self-interest” as its (toxic) glue? What will serve as the driver of social production and reproduction once the imperative of profit and the disciplinary mechanism of the world market are abolished? Often communists – along with other anti-capitalist radicals – focus primarily on exposing the criminal doings and structural underpinnings of the present system, on what needs to be criticized or even dismantled, rather than what can and will replace it. But how in fact would we, could we, should we operate the system that will come after this one? We can certainly do a lot worse than to call for the cultivation of a kind of communist love – the treatment of others as ends in
themselves, a loving practical recognition that “the free development of each provides the condition for the free development of all,” etc.

And yet, listening to Hardt, I could not help but wonder: can “love” do the job without the benefit of some organized force? A force that can, when it is necessary, bring to bear violence or the threat of violence in order to defend or extend communist gains and to deal with the residual and emergent elements of class domination or exploitation, as well as other anti-social forces? Isn’t it conceivable that part of what can (or maybe even must) bond a new communist social subject is precisely the necessity of suppressing its former or would-be oppressors and exploiters? Dialectically speaking – and here I think of Sartre’s notion of “the Third,” the Other whose threatening “look” forces two subjects who were formerly independent of (or even antagonistic to) one another to fuse into a Group – is it not in part the need to confront the common enemy that compels working-class people to recognizing themselves as a proletariat in the first place?

Indeed, in this talk about the “monstrosity” of communist revolution, I was struck by the lack of discussion of anything like the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” Asked to address this longstanding communist concept during the Q and A, Hardt responded by acknowledging a certain space for the “dictatorship of the proletariat” understood narrowly (as he said Lenin understood it) as the “teaching of new habits” to the people. This is certainly an interesting and useful way to think about – one aspect of – the dictatorship of the proletariat. Yet it seems to remain again somewhat mired in the immediacy of micro-level interpersonal relations. Again: What of the need for strategy? For restructuring the social totality in line with a rational and egalitarian plan? For dealing with antagonistic contradictions, between the communizing people and those determined to restore capitalist relations, whether they are associated with the displaced ruling class, or with new elements immanent to the post-revolutionary society who seek consciously to develop and consolidate new forms of class distinction, oppression, and/or exploitation? What to do with those who refuse to accept the “teachings” of communization, who insist on resisting by force or arms? Does Hardt’s “new love” include tough

35. Of course, it is also possible to conceive of love and violence as non-exclusive entities: a kind of “tough love” for and of the common.
36. It’s worth noting that something like this notion of a dictatorship of the proletariat has been re-emergent in contemporary radical thought, from Žižek to Dean, to Hallward…
love, modeled on the parent who uses her authority to force a child to learn (and to enact) the difference between right and wrong? Though I would of course agree that communists ought to strive to win people to a love of the common through appeal to their best selves, through the experience of cooperation and common struggle, as well as through arguments (and cultural productions) aimed at expanding their sense of “self-interest” to incorporate the needs of others, it seems to me that there is no getting around the need for an organized force that is capable of generating not only love, but also, frankly, fear.

Fredric Jameson’s “Citizen’s Militia,” (or, shifting politics to army time)

In his closing talk at MLG (an organization that he helped to found in 1969), Fredric Jameson framed a radically different approach to our contemporary moment and the current prospects for socialism (his preferred term, as distinct from what he deemed the more “utopian” term of communism). His lecture proved a stark contrast to Hardt’s, in both content and form. Its content was as novel – even shocking – as Hardt’s was familiar; its form as enigmatic as Hardt’s was seemingly straightforward.

Jameson titled his lecture “The Aesthetics of Singularity,” though he indicated from the start that the talk was not really going to be about aesthetics (indeed, he said that he was “not interested” in the “return to aesthetics,” except as a social symptom). Rather, he said, his talk would be about temporality, that is, about our perception and representation of time and the relationship of things and people to and through time. Painting a picture of the present as a moment that has increasingly come to see and to express itself in terms of instants and happenings, in which “curators” stage singular, one-time-only “events,” Jameson offered reflections on “various exhibits” taken from the realm of art (the installation), economics (the derivative), theory (here he gestured to the work of Deleuze and Guattari, though one could hear a more subterranean mining aimed at the underlying tenets of Alain Badiou), and, of course, politics (flashmobs, and other new mass tactics – again one could hear a certain implicit criticism of Occupy). In each realm, Jameson emphasized how the dimension of Time (duration, sustenance, development, etc.) appears to have retreated from view in favor of a sense of “singularity,” an ephemeral vanishing point that is as one-of-a-kind as it is fleeting; indeed, such a singularity never even properly exists in the present, but only in the past, as something that has already happened.
I will deal here primarily with the more overtly political “manifesto”-like addendum which Jameson presented as the second part of what he dubbed a “two-for-one” special. It was in these closing remarks (remarks which, notably, he dedicated to the late Hugo Chávez) that Jameson weighed in – negatively, dialectically, provocatively, to be sure – on unfolding discussions about how to conceive and to forward the cause of socialism, from the standpoint of the present moment. Nonetheless, we must situate Jameson’s closing comments against the backdrop of his longer speech, including his contention that “all politics today are the politics of real estate” (from anti-gentrification, to immigration, to ecology), as well as his temporal observation (noted above) that the predominant notion of politics these days features politics as “installation” or as “event,” as “happening.” For it was thus against this dominant political common sense – one that privileges space and happening and singularity, over sustained, systematic, development over time – that Jameson put forth his provocative proposal.

And I do mean provocative: Alluding to the failed call for a Citizen’s Militia in Machiavelli’s The Prince, Jameson argued that we too, from the confines of our particular historical moment, should support universal military conscription; that, in a sense, we should all join the Army, and not just for a two-year stint. We should join the Army permanently. (At the very least, I interpret him to be suggesting that we should all be living on Army Time.)

In some ways, Jameson’s remarks can be understood as a direct, if oblique, response to (or perhaps, assault on?) many of the concepts and approaches that Michael Hardt put forth in his talk the night before, and which are represented across critical theory today. Against Hardt’s economistic faith in capitalism producing communism as its immanent underside, Jameson offered a blatantly political, even voluntaristic proposal based in collective subjective decision. Against

37. Jameson suggested that he hadn’t planned on delivering this closing “manifesto,” but that he felt he owed it to others, or at least to himself, to share it, at least in part in response to the discussions during the last few days of MLG, when he was in attendance. (Another exceptional – and precious – trait of the MLG’s Summer Institute is that even “big name scholars” are expected, when possible, to attend and to engage the work of newly emerging scholars, graduate students and junior professors. Indeed, even the very practice of granting extended time to single “big names” is not uncontroversial.)

38. To be clear: Jameson wasn’t calling for the creation of an independent People’s Liberation Army – at least not explicitly. He was calling for everyone across the country to join (or to imagine joining) the existing US military, or even to change the laws so that everyone would be forced to do so. Universal military conscription.
Hardt’s call for abolishing the state, Jameson offered a call for universal *inclusion* in the state. Against Hardt’s endorsement of the direct democratic self-management of the commons – and of a new love – Jameson called (at least implicitly) for embracing and engaging hierarchical structures of command and leadership – for imposed discipline and the use of force. Against Hardt’s focus on the flowering of new and autonomous common spaces, Jameson insisted on the question of duration, on persistence in time.

Furthermore, extending an important emphasis in his recent book, *Reading Capital*, Jameson framed the ‘proposal’ – though I think it might be more accurate to term it a *provocation* – as a way to force the capitalist system to do what it cannot do: internalize the "surplus" population of the *unemployed.* Here too there was another marked contrast with Hardt, who suggested a progressive aspect to capitalism’s increasingly communal *productive* processes; Jameson suggested that it would not be the qualitative shift in the experience of labor, but rather the excluded excess of those left without work at all, that could expose and explode the system. He likened his proposal to a version of “Trotskyist entryism,” but he was also implicitly incorporating the Trotskyist notion of “transitional demands,” that is, the idea that demands for system-reform that become inherently revolutionary, insofar as the system is incapable of accommodating them – or so that theory goes... “Capitalism could never accommodate such a demand,” he asserted.

The significance of Jameson’s “dedication” here emerges: Hugo Chávez was a widely celebrated socialist leader who – though he went on to win more internationally observed and scrutinized elections and referendums than perhaps any leader in history – built his first (unsuccessful) bid for power, and thus his political reputation, on an attempted coup, itself based on his persona as a charismatic military leader. It was perhaps fitting then that Jameson suggested the Army as a way to bypass those elements of the current US American state – the executive, the legislative, the judiciary – that are most firmly in the hands of corporations, and even as a way of getting around the American Constitution’s essentially counter-revolutionary structure. He added that the military appears to be the only “public” social institution in America that still enjoys wide support, and noted that a campaign focused on getting masses of people to volunteer and/or get

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39. ‘Even under fascism?’ I couldn’t help but wonder.
40. He also suggested that there were political opportunities implicit in the outsourcing and privatization of elements of the US military – perhaps a nod to the recent case of Edward Snowden.
themselves conscripted into the Army might have the virtue of helping to create a new mass youth movement (unemployment being a growing reality for many of these young people).

Implied in this approach was an irreverent refusal of, if not contempt for, the “sanctity” of so-called democratic processes, particularly in a state increasingly captured by capital, and perhaps also a criticism of those who would focus efforts within these captured zones. Jameson pushed so far as to add that, in some ways, the military itself is/can be a ‘socialist’ institution – providing free healthcare, housing, pensions, to its members, etc. Here Jameson minimized the class distinctions, including patriarchal domination, that characterize the actually existing US military (not to mention the rather large question of imperialism). Rather puzzlingly, he went so far as to wax nostalgic for a kind of “good old days” when the US military was “an example for the rest of the world,” overlooking (or at least minimizing) a long history of imperialism that extends back well before World War II.

Though Jameson did not spell it out as such, his proposal sounded a bit like calls for a Civil Defense Corps, a militarized version of a government Federal Works program that might “put youth to work” on such things as infrastructure projects or environmental cleanups, or perhaps energy conversion and other anti-climate-change initiatives. Jameson didn’t go into any such specifics in his talk. But if one were to insist on imagining a “permanent war mobilization” that does not put us on the road to World War III, it might make most sense to select as “enemy” the ecologic devastation of the planet, as well as perhaps other threats to social reproduction now facing the people under capitalism – a kind “War to Defend Life on the Planet” to combat what John Bellamy Foster at Monthly Review has termed capitalism’s “War on the Planet.”

Again, the dialectical meaning of Jameson’s provocation can be grasped as an insistence on rethinking the need for a Great Collective Project, in a bold and ordered and disciplined way, against those who would tail the spontaneity of mass responses, or who respond to the prospect of ecological catastrophe with calls for “less” organized human intervention in the natural world, rather than, say, more (and more rational, more egalitarian, more sustainable, more planned) intervention. Jameson was here implicitly developing a notion that he has

41. The difference here between Jameson’s proposal and more liberal incarnations that have come from Obama and others is that Jameson’s Corps would be all-inclusive, not to mention paid, not volunteer.

42. Joel Kovel has made a similar analogy to the great collective project of World War II in his call, in a recent Boston Occupier article, for ecosocialist transition.
touched upon elsewhere, such as at the very end of his book *A Singular Modernity* (Verso, 2002), the notion that, at least in the United States, it seems that the only popular language for thinking the “great collective project” (akin to revolution) appears to be that of War itself.43

Jameson did not, however, delve into the question of the demographic and political breakdown of this “broad support.” And without this, there lingers the danger of tailing the more conservative, even reactionary – if for that very reason more culturally visible – elements of the society, rather than seeking out the more radicalized (but perhaps less visible) elements, including millions of people who, it may be safe to say, remain very suspicious or even hostile to the institution of the US military, with damn good reason. Isn’t anti-imperialist consciousness an important element of any would-be revolutionary mix? And don’t the crimes of imperialism, as well as the gross inequalities of international capitalism, provide some of the sharpest angles for helping people to see the need, and the possibility, for revolutionary change? For that matter, doesn’t US history – especially of the Vietnam War era – show us how rapidly mass attitudes about the “popular” institution of the US military can shift in a radical direction, in the context of mass struggles, including armed struggles led by the oppressed themselves?44

Similarly, Jameson did not raise the question of how this ‘popular’ institution is viewed (or experienced) *internationally*, near or far from the hundreds of US military bases that stand on non-US terrain, and especially in the several countries that find themselves the subject of actual US military occupations and/or regular drone strikes and CIA interventions. Should these occupied peoples join the US military as well? This gaping blindspot was exposed via a question put forth by a comrade who asked if people in other countries should also build up *their own* militaries in this same way – an implicit reminder of the historical tendency for capitalism, when faced with irresolvable crisis, to resort to the catastrophic “solution” of World War.45

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43. It is of course World War II that figures most prominently here. I do wonder however if this point isn’t rather one-sided. Certainly the massive social movements of the 1950s and 60s still have resonance with many people, however subaltern they may be with respect to dominant discourses.

44. Here, interestingly, Jameson’s preference for the term socialism, rather than communism, looms large, the latter having a more overtly internationalist tenor than the former.

45. Some went so far as to suggest that had Jameson’s proposal come from any speaker but Jameson himself he might have been rudely “torn apart” for his militarism and blindness to imperialism.
Nonetheless, Jameson’s implicit call to view the attraction felt by some sectors of US opinion as more than just evidence of pro-imperialist indoctrination, is one that should not be dismissed out of hand. Such militaro-philia seems to me to be in part a reaction to the pervasive cynicism and existential chaos of a postmodern, ‘post-fordist’ capitalism, whose extremes of commodification, alienation, precarity, and disruption are leaving many people (especially the young) reaching for ‘fundamental meaning’ of one sort or another, something they can believe in, a “Cause” larger than themselves, a group and place where they can find discipline, loyalty, an ethos of teamwork – a sense of meaningful ongoingness, to bring things back to Jameson’s temporal frame – that appears to be lacking elsewhere. The military looks good, in short, next to McDonalds, Facebook, and Reality TV (not to mention unemployment or prison). We need to do better than merely condemning incorrect ideas; we need to take seriously – and to work to transform – the material (as well as ideological) conditions that lead people to hold to such false ideas and pursue false solutions.

But this is quite a different thing from catering to those ideas and attitudes as they stand today. If Hardt would have us tail the economic trends of Empire’s capitalism, Jameson would appear to have us tail its politics.46

What was provoked

Responses to Jameson’s talk among MLGers varied widely. These differences reflected not only competing political positions but also different modes of reading Jameson’s speech itself. Was the speech a serious proposal or a provocation? A blueprint or a thought-experiment? A conceptual exercise to make us stretch and reflect on our operative categories, or a parody designed to expose the limits of such “big picture political proposals” in general? Was its “meaning” to be located in its own propositional content, or rather negatively,

46. One could certainly take issue with Jameson’s proposal as a proposal, raising any number of practical considerations: Of course the US military would not and could not accept the entire population into its ranks. Of course reactionary influences and ideologies are at least as prominent in the US military as anywhere else on the planet. Of course, the military is not outside of class society, is still full of hierarchies and oppressions. No doubt the services they do make available to enlisted soldiers often leave much to be desired, even if the VA hospitals are some of the only actually existing “socialized medicine” on hand today in America, and so on. But to focus on such immediate practicalities may be to miss the philosophical thrust of Jameson’s overall intervention.
in its implicit contrast with other ideas (and other ways of conveying ideas) that had been proposed during the week?

One way to evaluate a paper or speech of course – especially one that appears to be coded as provocation – is to track the ways that others are provoked by it, noting what issues and questions are raised, even and especially if in the mode of “disagreeing” with what has been put forth by the speaker. Questions that were raised in response to Jameson’s provocation – both during the Q + A, and afterwards – were certainly an interesting mix. They ranged from the bitter: “How could Jameson give such a ridiculous talk at a serious venue like MLG?” to the self-reflective: “Would we have let anyone else but Jameson get away with a speech like that? Anyone else would have been torn to pieces!” But they also included more potentially practical questions, such as: “Who would conscript this army?” “Who would lead it?” How could we form our own “Army”? My own question from the floor ran along the lines of: “Rather than joining their army, why don’t we build our own and try to split theirs?” He said: “Because they’d kill us all. And furthermore, what would we attack?” Certainly, Jameson’s quip stands as a valid response to the idea of launching insurrection tomorrow, but it did not engage the more compelling idea of building some sort of radical “Citizens’ Militia,” with a long range view.

Bearing in mind Jameson’s framing comments that his speech was to be about temporality, we might consider his proposal as intended to instigate a shift in our political thinking in relation to time. What would it mean to live and to act (to write, to teach, and to organize) on what we might call “Army time”? Army time, as opposed to the time of singularity and of ephemeral events and happenings? This in mind, we might hear Jameson as echoing the sentiments of Slavoj Žižek, spoken prophetically to the gathered protesters of Occupy Wall Street in Zuccotti Park at the height of that spectacular anti-capitalist event. Žižek emphasized that the point was not to experience Occupy as a moment that could live on as nostalgic radical memory; the point was rather to use the upsurge to lay plans for “the day after,” to “fall in love” not “with ourselves” in the midst of the carnival of revolt, but with the “hard work” that lies ahead, to develop forms of organization and modes of practice that could make a material difference in everyday reality after the initial radical upsurge has subsided, which of course, according to Žižek, it always does, and as – at least for now – it has.

Perhaps it is time to live not just in the End Times (anticipating and exposing crisis after crisis), but on Army Time (calculating the social
and political openings created by the catastrophes and strategizing an approach to the new terrain). If Jameson’s provocation stirred up some thought in MLG, and thus beyond it, about the possibility of radical organizing that takes on the duration and the discipline of an Army, then he made quite a contribution indeed.

At the end of the Q + A, in defending the idea of armies being potentially progressive forces, Jameson dropped a telling reference to what he characterized as the egalitarian successes of the early Maoist People Liberation’s Army in China. This was, suffice to say, a rather different force than the existing US military, and one whose example might lead listeners in a radically different direction than would Jameson’s seemingly nostalgic hearkening to the “days when the US military was a model for the rest of the world.” Bearing in mind the early Mao (rather than say Hugo Chávez, let alone Dwight D. Eisenhower) suggests that we contemplate not how to join the existing (Nationalist) forces, but how and where we could locate the contemporary equivalent of Yenan, where the Maoist PLA was born, in a space far from the repressive power of the state and its military, where a kind of exemplary liberated zone could be established, a place where revolutionaries might meaningfully regroup, organize and investigate, establishing the methods, the models, and the links to the people that might then make a serious countrywide communist campaign possible. “Where is our Yenan?” I asked Jameson on the way out of the conference. He stopped and nodded, and replied, that, while of course history can never be simply repeated, perhaps that is our question today. Where is our Yenan?

Perhaps Hardt’s spatial topography of the emerging commons has something to contribute to this question as well, (and to helping us address the concern Jameson expressed about them “killing us all”). And perhaps gatherings like MLG, however humble in many respects, may play a role in this vital project of finding the proper time and place for communism.