"On the Risk of a New Relationality:" An Interview with Lauren Berlant and Michael Hardt

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In May 2011, we sat down with Lauren Berlant and Michael Hardt to ask them about their use of love as a political concept. They each use the idiom of love to disrupt political discourse, as a means of thinking through non-sovereign social and subjective formations. Love, for both these thinkers, is transformative, a site for a collective becoming-different, that can help to inform alternate social imaginaries. But their notions about how this happens diverge. In his lecture at Banff, through a close reading of Marx, Michael Hardt proposed that substituting love for money or property as the means for organizing the social can open up new social and political

projects. More generally, he begins from the position of love as ontologically constitutive, or love as a generative force. Lauren Berlant's description of love has attended to the ways in which love disorganizes our lives, opening us to move beyond ourselves. And so, for Berlant, the concepts of love and optimism foreground the sort of difficulties and investments involved in creating social change, understood as the construction of an attachment to a world that we don't know yet, but that we hope will provide the possibility for flourishing. Throughout the interview, Berlant and Hardt try on each other's positions, organizing relationality through models of incoherence and multiplicity. In this, they speak to, reflect, inform, and inspire activist projects of social change from queer communities to neo-anarchist organizers. What follows is an excerpt from our discussion.[1]

Davis: What is it about love that makes it a compelling or politically interesting concept? What kind of work does love do politically that other concepts don't do?

Hardt: One healthy thing love does, which is probably not even the core of it, but at least one healthy thing it does is it breaks through a variety of conceptions about reason, passion, and the role of affect in politics. There are a number of other ways of doing this, but considering love as central to politics confounds the notion of interest as driving politics. Love makes central the role of affect within the political sphere.

Another thing that interests me is how love designates a transformative, collective power of politics – transformative, collective, and also sustained. If it were just a matter of the

construction of social bonds and attachments, or rupture and transformation, it would be insufficient. For me, it would have to be a necessarily collective, transformative power in duration.

When I get confused about love, or other things in the world, thinking about Spinozian definitions often helps me because of their clarity. Spinoza defines love as the increase of our joy, that is, the increase of our power to act and think, with the recognition of an external cause. You can see why Spinoza says self-love is a nonsense term, since it involves no *external* cause. Love is thus necessarily collective and expansive in the sense that it increases our power and hence our joy. Here's one way of thinking about the transformative character of love: we always lose ourselves in love, but we lose ourselves in love in the way that has a duration, and is not simply rupture. To use a limited metaphor, if you think about love as muscles, they require a kind of training and increase with use. Love as a social muscle has to involve a kind of askesis, a kind of training in order to increase its power, but this has to be done in cooperation with many.

Berlant: Another way to think about your metaphor, Michael, is that in order to make a muscle you have to rip your tendons.

I often talk about love as one of the few places where people actually admit they want to become different. And so it's like change without trauma, but it's not change without instability. It's change without guarantees, without knowing what the other side of it is, because it's entering into relationality.

You asked your question in two ways: you asked why is love

potentially interesting for politics and why is it potentially interesting in ways that other concepts aren't. They are really different kinds of questions. One is comparative, and the other asks what does love open for you. I tend to think more about what a thought can open. Because we're looking for something, some way of talking about the possibility of an attachment to a kind of collectivity that doesn't exist yet. There are lots of things that can do that, like fascism, or the politically orchestrated forms of sociality that could do that. But we want the thing that includes a promise that you will feel held by relationality though not necessarily always good in it, as you are changing.

Unlike Michael, who is trying to think love as a better concept for suturing or inducing the social, I'm trying to think about what the affects of belonging are without attaching them to one or another emotional vernacular. We're being formalist about this: we're describing the conditions of the possibility of an orientation toward being in relation, which could be lived in lots of ways. We're thinking of the affective phenomenology of these conditions, not how to do it.

The thing I like about love as a concept for the possibility of the social is that love always means non-sovereignty. Love is always about violating your own attachment to your intentionality, without being anti-intentional. I like that love is greedy. You want incommensurate things and you want them now. And the now part is important.

The question of duration is also important in this regard, because there are many places in which one holds duration. One holds duration in one's head, and one holds duration in relation. As a

formal relation, love could have continuity, whereas, as an experiential relation, it could have discontinuities.

When you plan social change, you have to imagine the world that you could promise, the world that could be seductive, the world you could induce people to want to leap into. But leaps are awkward, they're not actually that beautiful. When you land, you're probably going to fall, or hurt your ankle or hit someone. When you're asking for social change, you want to be able to say there will be some kind of cushion when we take the leap. What love does as a seduction for this, and has done historically for political theory, is to try to imagine some continuity on the affective level. One that isn't experienced at the historical, social or everyday level, but that still provides a kind of referential anchor affectively and as a political project.

In your talk, Michael, you spoke about love as two kinds of things, as a relation of property, and as a relation of exchange. But what about the kinds of dissolution within relationality that could happen under a regime governed by love?

Also, you say that love is collective in Spinoza because there is an external cause for it. I don't think that's accurate, but I think it's interesting that you think it is. In Spinoza you're visited by love; it's a transcendental visitation. Love is not public. So, what does public mean to you? Is public just external to the subject? Or does it mean… what's the relationship between that and public as a general concept that's like love in that it's referential, or the kind of love that's a collectivity that feels itself?

Hardt: Let me start with the non-sovereign thing. I like that. If one

were to think a political project that would be based on or include love as a central motivation, you say, notions of sovereignty would be ruptured. That's very interesting and powerful. I assume we are talking about a variety of scales here simultaneously, where both the self and the social are not sovereign in love.

When we engage in love, we abandon at least a certain type of sovereignty. In what ways would sovereignty not be adequate in explaining a social formation that was grounded in love? If we were to think of the sovereign as the one who decides, in the social relation of love there is no *one* who decides. Which does not mean that there are no decisions but, rather, that there would be a non-one who decides. That seems like a challenging and interesting question: what is a non-sovereign social formation? How is decision-making then arrived at? These are the kinds of things that require modes of organization; that require, if not institutions, customs, or habits, at least certain means of organizing the decision-making process. In a politics of love, one of the interests for me is a non-sovereign politics, or a non-sovereign social formation. By thinking love as political, as somehow centrally involved in a political project, it forces us to think through that non-sovereignty, both conceptually, but also practically, organizationally.

In Spinoza, love is social in that it is external to me, that with which I have an encounter, but it's not necessarily human. In book five of the *Ethics*, Spinoza proceeds to the most obscure and lyrical accounts of love. Here, it's about the intellectual love of god, but that intellectual love of god, for Spinoza, is not the love of some anthropomorphic, ruling figure. It's rather a way of both understanding and engaging a relationship with the world around us, with both humans and

nonhumans, that consistently brings us joy and increases our power.

Berlant: But, I'll say why I thought it mattered to clarify this: because it's easier for me to take joy in the world than it is to take joy in other humans. The social is the problem of the inconvenience of other humans. It's easier to love your pet than another human, because the pet is manifesting itself to you with thereness and relationality, with responsibility but not demand. And it's your pet because you wanted it to be there for whatever version of this. We're trying to figure out how we could do this with humans in an affective register which recognizes the relationship between the joy-giving parts and the parts that require a kind of patience with the way things don't fit. The out-of-synchness of being matters.

I'm totally with you on the institution part, and I would like to ask, what is an institution? I'm super formal about this. I think a rhythm of life, a habit, all of the things that are affectively inculcated in one's orientation towards the world are institutions. What makes those things social is that you can return to them. They're available to other beings to return to and that's what makes them an institution. So one thing an institution is, is a set of norms and people who are responsible for enacting those norms or rules. But the other thing is in the sense that it poses the same question love poses: what's there to return to? And these are the things in the social that make people feel like there is a point of convergence rather than a chaos of convergence. It's important from the perspective of your work, Michael, because what people often mischaracterize is the romance of singularity as though that could ground the social. But the social really needs the activity of singular subjects organized in the world, which isn't the same thing as the disciplining of singularity to a

normative field. The question is what kinds of rhythms of being people could engender in order for there to be a social world they could rely on. Where this making of reliance on the world is not a thing outside of practice.

Hardt: There's two things that you're saying that seem useful to think a little more about. The first is that the institution is what we can return to. It seems useful to me that it's not only what a single subject can return to – in order to have a life you have to be able to return – but it's also what others can return to, and that's what makes it a social institution. I mean you might start by thinking about Proust and habit, you know, the way a life has to involve a certain kind of repetition. For example, 'we had dinner at six every night except on Sunday when dinner was at five-thirty.' Living a life requires a certain possibility of coming back. The concepts that tend towards the institution as we're thinking it, which is making available to others a practice one can return to and that can structure a life, are also in Proust, or habit in Peirce, or in the Pragmatists more generally, or forms of life for Wittgenstein.

Berlant: I wrote about this in *Cruel Optimism*, but I also have this piece on queer love, with three relevant bibliographic references: Bergson, Lefebvre, and Freud. While we are trying to amass what it is we would think about what it means to be habituated, Bergson has lots to say about habit as a mode of memory and the inculcation of being in the world. And it really resonated for me with Lefebrve's *Rhythmanalysis*, where he basically thinks about being a human as dressage—a rhythm of being that is vitalist, but not entirely normative either. It's the coordination of you with the animal. We could say a lot of things about how that could be generalized, but it's

also that you are in a relation to architecture and architecture is inducing your orientation.

Hardt: Dressage is primarily with reference to horses, correct?

Berlant: Yes, that's correct. That's why I said the animal. It's like you and the animal are figuring out how to be in sync and you're not the boss of the animal and it is not exactly the boss either. It's the thing you have to generate in the rhythm of being, of movement. So that seems exciting to think about.

Freud's "Economic Problem of Masochism" is one of my favourite essays. He basically says we don't really know anything of the subject; it's one of his really self-sceptical essays. But, he says, what we do know is that a subject is something like the effect of the rise and fall of affective intensity and that what you are is a set of habits of managing the rise and fall of affective intensity. So what's internal to you is also what's in relation to others and to worlds. The economic problem of masochism is a question about what it means to be subordinated to a rhythm of the social. But the thing about masochism is, as Bersani would also say, that it's not a non-agency, it's a desire to find one's footing within relationality. In some episodes he talks about this as a fading of the subject, as Lacan would, in other places he talks about the manifestation of it. So we have a lot of different traditions on the table here for thinking about what having a habit for managing the rhythm of relation would be. That's another way of talking about non-sovereignty. In Lefebvre, you're managing this rhythm in relation to objects and humans and the object world, which asks the question of the relation between an entirely social model of worlding and a natural model of worlding,

and trying to figure out what the points of convergence would be.

Davis: I'm really intrigued by the ways you both speak of how love is a project of non-sovereignty in terms of the social, the self, and the relationship between the social and nature. If you're trying to conceive of each of those layers with a certain consistency, whether that is a surface of habit or as an institution, then what is the difference between those formations and sovereignty?

Hardt: I'll start with some basic things. I think within the tradition of political theory, it's not at all clear what a non-sovereign politics could be. It's hard to make such grand generalizations, but the tradition of political theory we inherit is fundamentally related to the role and decision making of the one, whether that one be the king, the party, the liberal individual, all of these. Here, decision-making can only be performed by the one, and so I think this is what Toni Negri and I have felt is interestingly challenging about the concept of multitude itself. How can a multiplicity decide? The organization of decision-making is central for me for thinking politics or political theory. I guess I would apply this to the level of the individual too. How can an individual as multiplicity, and hence as non-sovereign, decide and not be just an incoherent helpless heap? What I think is required for that, now back again at the level of political theory, is understanding how collective structures, or structures of multiplicity, can enable social decision-making. We also have a long tradition of the possibility of the democracy proper – the rule of the many – but it's a minor tradition, or sometimes a subterranean tradition. That seems to be one way of characterizing what's at stake, or challenging in this.

One other pedagogical way of thinking about this, that seems to me useful for posing the problem, is the long tradition in European, Chinese, and many other political theorizing that goes back thousands of years, which poses an analogy between the human body and the social body. In these traditions, the analogy is very explicit: the army is the arms, the peasants are the feet, the king is the head, and so forth. This assumes the centrality, hierarchy, and unity of the organs of the body that ground and justify the centrality and unity of the organs of the social body. The natural assumption, in Hobbes and any number of others, about the human body and its functions, are what make necessary that kind of social form.

So what if one were to take seriously the contemporary or even the last thirty years of neuroscience that talks about the non-centrality of thought processes and decision-making processes in the brain? What if we were to keep the analogy and say, well, actually the brain is not centred. It's an incredible complex of neurons firing and chemical processes. Thinking about the human body and the brain, in particular, as a non-centred multiplicity, would help us understand a radically different social body. I think that my inclination generally would be to throw out the analogy, but it's at least polemically interesting to say let's take the analogy and recognize it for what it is, and the functioning of the brain might help us understand that sovereignty was a mistaken idea in the first place for how the individual functions.

Berlant: I think "sovereignty" badly conceptualizes almost anything to which it's attached. It's an aspirational concept and, as often happens, aspirational concepts get treated as normative concepts, and then get traded and circulated as realism. And I think that's what

happened with sovereignty. So, in "Slow Death," I say that perhaps we should throw sovereignty out, but people are so invested in it maybe we can't, because you can't just decide that ghosts don't exist. You have to find a way to change something from within, so you just gave us a model for doing that, Michael.

There's another way of going at this that also has to do with a different relation to incoherence. Part of the reason I think that queer theory and love theory are related to each other as political idioms is that queer theory presumes the affective incoherence of the subject with respect to the objects that anchor it or to which they're attached. Could we see the multiplicity of kinds of attachment through which any incoherent being proceeds in the world as an opportunity to radically multiply the norms of intelligibility that would enable people to feel like there was a thing to return to within the social that they could have opted in for? One thing that is very powerful for me to try and think about is how we could have a political pedagogy that deals with incoherence: where the taking up of a position would not be so that an individual can appear coherent, intentional, agentive–even if that's how they encounter themselves through their object. I seek a way that situational clarity can be produced that acknowledges the fractures withinthe subject. Training in one's own incoherence, training in the ways in which one's complexity and contradiction can never be resolved by the political is a really important part of a political theory of non-sovereignty. But we still have to find a place for adjudication, or working out, or working for, or working over, which requires a pedagogy of attention, of paying attention to the different way in which the different kinds of claims on the world, one's attachments or ways of moving or desires for habituation, or aspirations could

engender.

So, I don't go to the brain for anything. I like the nervous system better, because it's there we really experience the clash among visceral responses and normative codings. But the fact that you have a stomach brain and a head brain and the stomach brain tells me that so much is on the table that we don't know. We're so enigmatic. Let's say we could start with the enigma part and we understand that the brain itself can shut down when it has different aims, that there are forms of stuckness that are bodily. Those forms of stuckness, when I ask what it is that I can't work through, are little pedagogical openings. Sovereignty, as a model for a heroic and successful being, nation, or body politic, presents the problem of not being able to deal with contradiction as constitutive to the productivity of life. When we start with non-sovereignty, those things on the table are not things to be repaired, but things about which the social should be capacious, and the political imaginary should also be capacious. Because the minute you have a mono-subject or a mono-culture or collectivity as the feeling of being the same as your aspiration, then you have to negate the non-sovereign organism, which is the site and chaos of the social. I think that's what a lot of hysterical politics is trying to do. It's trying to say my hysteria is a symptom of injustice and I would like to feel simple emotionally, I would like the social to be simple so that I can feel simple in relation to it. There is a mimetic desire in the sovereignty model of the social.

Hardt: I'm interested and uncertain about the way I'm assuming continuity between the self and society, specifically through the valence of joy. I recognize my attraction to that, but I think the analogy is wrong. I think it's smoothing a continuum of degrees and

I'm questioning myself at the moment about what kind of limitation or drawbacks does that kind of thinking entail.

Berlant: I have two responses to that, and one is, and this is going to be a much longer conversation obviously, but the question of cause and effect is central to this. I always think of ways of being in the world in terms of affective relationality rather than in terms of origins or causes. In the end, I think we're not going to like any of those languages, of degrees or planes or domains, and we're going to find better ways to talk about the form that gets engendered through relationality.

The second response is about the increase of our powers. I always have a phrase that I've decided is a placeholder phrase, as phrases often are in my life, which for a long time is a satisfying phrase, and then I realize I haven't actually made it into a thought yet. For example, in a crisis culture we're so excited about gaming the difference between zero and one that flourishing somehow gets bracketed. Survival looks like a triumph, and that's a terrible thing. I want flourishing. But what do I mean by flourishing anyway? What are all of the synonyms I know for flourishing? There aren't that many. Isn't that interesting? The phrase you use to hold open a space is "an increase in joy." But an increase of joy might not feel like increase. It might feel like relief, it might feel like I can be a mass of incoherent things and not be defeated by that. Or it could feel experientially like all sorts of things. It would be increase in the sense of proliferation, but not necessarily intensification. There's this terrible language in a certain kind of political theory now about capacities, capacities as measuring increase, and the more you have the better off you are. As we're trying to figure out the materiality of

the relation between the affective infrastructures that we're imagining and what it would feel like to be in those, one of the things we'll ask is when does increase not feel like it? And when are other languages available?

How come you didn't anchor your attempt here to imagine the affective motor for a new social confidence to joy rather than love?

Hardt: Love is the social mobilization of joy. They're intimately related. The short version is: Joy can be without others, whereas love can't. You're right, though, that increase and capacities aren't the only way of thinking of flourishing.

Berlant: I wasn't saying that in a critical way. I was just saying increasing won't always be represented as increase. It won't be always accumulation or extension. It might be extension, and this goes to the continuity question, but it will have something to do with proliferation.

Hardt: My project is about what I conceive of as democracy and collective self-governance. In my view, this does require an increase of capacities. So, on one hand, I certainly agree with you when I read all the NGO literature about capacities, which seems to me inadequate. And yet, on the other hand, when Du Bois writes in *Black Reconstruction* about the possibilities of a new social form among the recently freed slaves, he emphasizes that it cannot be spontaneous. If you take this population of ex-slaves now who were dominated by ignorance and poverty, if you tried to make a democratic form as they are now, it would simply be the rule of ignorance and poverty. Spinoza says something very similar at a

certain point, as does Lenin. For Spinoza, it's about superstition. Right at the eve of the soviet revolution, Lenin says, "Russians as they are now have a boss at work, they need a boss in politics. Human nature, as it is now, can't self-govern. What we need to do now is transform human nature." For me, what that means is that we need to create the conditions for the habits and powers for collective self-rule. Any discussion of love has to point in that direction towards the increase of our power, capacities, or talents with the idea of democracy. There is nothing natural or spontaneous about this idea of democracy – it has to be learned. It's about education more generally, like an athlete needs to be trained, but there is no trainer.

Berlant: But there are so many trainers.

Hardt: Right. This kind of general education is not something that someone can do by one's self completely. But I'm fleeing the sense that Lenin and Du Bois share that a certain type of social hierarchy is required to make that transition, be it the state, or a talented tenth, or something that can train the others in democracy, I'm much more attracted to models of transformation that don't involve the trainers.

Berlant: How do you learn to live democracy? When does a concept of the social as an orientation towards the world and towards being with others get inculcated and what does it mean to be sufficient to it? It was Kant in "What is Enlightenment?," who said you have to learn how to have reason so the people who learn to have it first can then teach others. I feel that that's probably a mistake since it depends on if you think about democracy as the institutions of democracy, or if you think of democracy as the affects and orientations toward democracy, and whether those institutions are

representative. Maybe you do want to go back to, or are still in, a civil society model, where the institutions of democracy are representing the livedness of it. We didn't begin there. We began with a more synthetic and integrated orientation because there's a lot of thinking that we need to do there, rather than from the place where institutions are exterior representations of a lived orientation. So it's the question again of being trained for or learning an orientation toward democracy, and the relationship between one's own incoherence and the problem of adjudicating social difference, social inconvenience, and fantasy, which we really haven't gotten to talk about yet. Democracy is also a fantasy. It's a set of social relations that entails different sets of descriptions. But where does that fantasy come from and how does that fantasy get distributed in representational form and also in its other forms? All those things are in play here. So I'm not sure I'm comfortable with a representational model of the institutions of democracy.

Hardt: No, I'm not either. In fact that's what I would assume based on how we were talking about the possibility of a non-sovereign politics would be about finding non- representational forms of self rule.

Berlant: That's hard because we want there to be a normative enough flow for there to be habits and we want there to be institutions even. But we want a model of– I'm saying this as though we've agreed on it in advance–embeddedness rather than exteriority.

Sarlin: How does the imaginary function differently for each of you?

Berlant: Do you mean imaginary in a Lacanian sense, or?

Sarlin: No, I mean it in the sense of the social imaginary. Both of you are engaging in a project of imagining, but there is a distinction between the way that you, Lauren, see the role of the social imaginary and fantasy in politics, and the way that Michael doesn't talk directly about the social imaginary.

Hardt: I would start answering your question by thinking about the imagination as a power rather than the imaginary. I mean, if one were to attribute any importance to the work we do, it is in fact largely about the stimulation of the imagination, ours and others.

One of the things that does seem relatively new to me is the extent of the political resignation, by which I mean the lack of imagination, of people in general. The understanding that the social forces of domination are so large now that it's just impossible to imagine life differently, either life without capital, or life without the domination of the US military and any number of things that seem so fixed. Part of the positive political effects of the kind of scholarship we're engaged with is the stimulation of the imagination and a recognition that the world could be different.

It's a lovely thing in Spinoza, how he says that prophets have no shortcut to the truth they just have much more powerful imaginations than the rest of us. Such statements were read as heretical, but he means it in the nice way. He's all for the prophets. He didn't mean to deflate them. It's a really important thing that they have much more imagination than the rest of us. The imagination is constitutive, and I think this is true of how you,

Lauren, use fantasy too. It's not just unworldly, detached from the world spinning off the refusal of things, rather it's constitutive in the sense that the imagination becomes so intense and embedded that it becomes real through its intensification and articulation. That puts theory in the realm of prophecy, but not prophecy in the realm of saying what's going to happen. Instead, it's the fostering of the imagination, the encouraging of that power to recognize that life can be, and in some ways already is, different. I realize that's not quite the way that imaginary and fantasy function for you.

Berlant: But I think that was a great description. For me, fantasy is in realism. What is possible, what is probable, what an action might do, and the scale and the scope of the possible effects of things, that's all about fantasy, projection, and attachment. It's not exterior to life at all, it's interior. It's all about moving within the space of living. So I have no problem with your description. I just had two thoughts to add.

One is about excitement and the fear of excitement. When people encounter theoretical work that says things could be otherwise, they often get excited and they also often come in with an "I don't want to get over-excited by this" feeling, because it's too much. "That's not gonna work," etc. The fear of an optimism for social transformation is not just the fear of people who have an investment in the norms of the world, it's also the fear of the people for whom the world isn't working and who have a political commitment to being otherwise, but for whom that kind of excitement is unbearable. I think that's what is interesting about the way that theory induces ambivalence. In the way you just described it, I'm sure it will also induce ambivalence in readers.

The other thing that's important to say that for many people who are politically depressed, or who have some version of having a negative political relation to the world, the impossibility of imagining life differently constitutes realism: all they can imagine is loss. And so the question is whether it would be possible to imagine life differently in some way in which loss would be a part of the possibility of building something better. Unfortunately the horizon of loss is omnipresent.

Hardt: In that way "another world is possible" is not a good slogan because people are constantly imagining another worse world possible.

Berlant: Exactly, exactly. That's right.

Hardt: I'd like to hear a little bit more about your experience with optimism, and start from my inclination often to reject the term optimism as it's given to me and that's why I want to reject it. It's given to me by people saying "oh well Mike, why are you so optimistic," "what makes you so optimistic," like "it was fun reading your book because it was optimistic, but actually I really know that things aren't going to be that way or can't be that way" or something like that. And I feel that when I'm being called optimistic, it's an insult, and what is meant by it is that I'm pretending things are going to be better without having any reason to believe it.

Berlant: That's actually not why, it's because you're saying "they're already better.'" You know the thing about "it's already there," and everyone's like "no it's not." You know?

Hardt: I usually want to respond to that by saying: no, I'm not

optimistic, at least not in the way you meant it. I'm confident. And by confident I mean I have a reason to be. For instance, it sounds optimistic to think that people will rise up today to overthrow the forms of domination under which we're suffering. But my response in general is, do a little historical work. More or less, people have found ways to subvert and transform every previous form of domination. Of course, it hasn't always ended up as the best of all possible worlds. Nonetheless revolt happens. People rise up. Why would that stop today? So it seems to be a matter of confidence. So what I'm wondering about is, what relation would you pose. In a way you're posing a double relationship to optimism and I want to hear a little more about that.

Berlant: Ok. I often say things like the thing that you described, like: in our lifetimes there have been enormous transformations in a really fantastic way, never complete, never enough and always with internal problems, but it's important. It's important to remind people there's a tradition, an ongoing tradition of social transformation in which people use time they don't have to make worlds that haven't existed yet. Worlds that include less defeating relations to power that feels exterior that they make, as it were, interior to their agency. But I love that. I never get called optimistic.

Hardt: Oh, but your work is really optimistic!

Berlant: I know! That's the thing. But the optimism is very specific, which is in the pedagogical: my conviction is that you can become different, and worlds can become different, through social organization and the circulation of thought and concepts of what a resource is. But I start where things are stuck, which you don't do.

Then I try to figure out why people are staying there. Oh, because they figured out a way to flourish in the midst of stuckness; that's interesting. So let's think about the heterotopia, let's think about different folds of attachment and possibility in the middle of X. And so what I always hope is that the place of productive transformation will dissolve the places of stuckness that are actually defeating life. And I mean life in the kind of big global earthy sense as well as at the scale of persons. But often it doesn't – that's what's interesting. Often the places that make people and worlds possible aren't dissolving the places of destructive being. I have optimism about all of that, but because of starting in stuckness, I don't get accused of happiness. It's not where I begin. I think that probably matters a lot to the different ways our work is received.

The other thing I was thinking was, and I started realizing this when I was working on the Hawthorne book actually, I realized that people's attachment to the nation form was an optimistic attachment, that there could be an institutional and phantasmatic system that could allow people to proceed incoherently in the social, because they are incoherent and they're politically incoherent, and in love they make no sense. But there would be room for them to make sense in a way that would be joyous and life building. What was so interesting about that for me was that a generation of leftists older than me said, "when we started reading your book we just didn't know how you could write it because the nation form is just a horrible monster that destroys things," and I said "well I'm not saying it isn't." What I'm saying is that the nation form held a place for the continuity of optimism for what social life could be. You know? In that version of that encounter, it wasn't an insult, it was just their amazement that I didn't feel that the nation had already

lost its legitimacy as a magnet for social life. But unfortunately, for many people the nation is kind of all there is for imagining what social life could be. As a result, there are a lot of hysterical politics organized around the nation. And even though there are all kinds of scales for being in the world that people are trying to imagine otherwise, the question of what the meta-structure could be that would deliver mass happiness, or that would hold a space open for the delivery of mass happiness, well, the nation still remains the name of it for many, many people.

In the current version of my life, a lot of my friends in queer social theory were very insulting to me about the word optimism in my work and thought. They didn't want it there. "Why don't you call it something else?" Because they thought optimism made you stupid. And I always say, well not the stupid kind. It has occurred to me from time to time, and this is my relation to the place of the concept of flourishing in psychoanalysis, which is that if you don't have an attachment to the world, you die from failure to thrive. And the phrase "failure to thrive" is a weepy phrase to me. I see it everywhere, I can't bear it. And interrupting 'failure to thrive' motors my politics, it funds it. The opposite of failure to thrive is what I mean by optimism. You have to have it to exist. I think that the people who are cynical just can't bear it. They can't bear the realist way of thriving, they want it to be in fantasy. In contrast, I want it now; I want it in the world now. I don't want it for kids later, I want it for now. Those are the kinds of different ways our histories have brought us into conjuncture around this, but it's also about admitting that being an intellectual, being a person who believes that concepts change things, and being political are fundamentally optimistic orientations, in the good sense. I'm not afraid of that, I'm not afraid

of that attachment to thriving, and I don't think you are either.

Sarlin: One more question. Why turn to this mode of imagining now? Why the idioms of love and optimism?

Berlant: Optimism is a way of interrupting the normative idioms of the political. It's a shock, we're not talking about states of exception and we're not talking about disciplinary society. Optimism starts in a place that's frightening because it's in an emotional vernacular, because it raises all sorts of questions about rearticulating sociality beyond reproducing the public and the private. So I think it's interruptive in its shock quality, but I don't mean that in a terrorizing sense, since interruptive qualities of optimism are a really important part of its productivity.

Hardt: For me, with regard to the discourses of today, there seemed to me to be an excessive focus on sovereignty, on the state of exception, even as antagonists, I mean. Those discourses close immediately and unavoidably the vulnerable position of wanting more. The discussions about the enormity of the sovereign that we face, the near impossibility of confronting that power that's both inside and outside the law, that puts us in the position of bare life, all of that obviates the problem of the vulnerability of wanting, of expressing the desire for the world to be different. Almost by saying, of course it can't be, by saying of course you're powerless so it doesn't matter what you want. In that way, talking about love seems a useful challenge to what I perceive as a dominant mode of political theorizing and political discourse today. It also connects up with a series of things emerging today and kinds of political movements or the kinds of theorizing going on in political movements that seems to

grasp that well. So the concept of love helps name an undercurrent that seems worth fostering in contrast to what I see as a dominant mode of theorizing.

Berlant: The discourse of political love has always, or long been, associated with religious idioms of thinking the social. Partly what we're doing is trying to bring it back into the place of political action, where political action and new social relations happen in time with different types of practices. I think Michael is right that there's already energy for that in neo-anarchists. And if you have a practice-based model of thinking in relation to other kinds of political work, it's also saying that it's not spirit over there and doing the material work of reorganizing life over here, but trying to find a synthetic language for both. In that way, it's jarring in a good sense, it's not just a mode of reflection but actually it's a mode for action and also a description of what it would take for people to take the risk of new relationality.

Hardt: That was a good last line, I like that.

Notes

[1] An earlier version of this interview can be found at nomorepotlucks.org.