

From Zanny Begg | Crowded in: the Multitude makes a come back
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...For Hardt and Negri the multitude is a whole of singularities irreducible to an individual unit or collective entity in synch with Baudelaire's call for the artist to concern themselves with both the "figurative and the infinite". It is distinguished from other descriptions of the crowd - particularly the "mob" and "the masses" by its self reflecting and self organising character. The mob is a frenzied collective of people which can be manipulated or lead from the outside. The people, a la Hobbes, is an identifiable mass of people whose needs and wants can be reflected by a higher sovereign power. The multitude, in contrast, is constitutive: it exists on the plane of immanence. As Negri explains the multitude is an "active social agent, a multiplicity that acts."

Negri's creative reappraisal of the working class/multitude has not, however, gone unchallenged. Alex Callinicos describes Negri's perspective as a "voluntaristic re-writing of Marxism". He accuses Negri of transforming Marxism into a post-structuralist theory of power which reduces the dynamics of class struggle into a clash of "wills" between a nebulous multitude and a nefarious capitalist class leaving a "strategic vacuum" for any serious advocate of revolution. Other orthodox Marxists have argued that the multitude is a catch all term which is too broad to provide a useful description of the relationship of the oppressed to the means of production.

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Dmitry Vilensky engages with this discussion in his work *The Negation of the Negation*. Vilensky projects video footage from a debate between Alex Callinicos and Antonio Negri on "multitude or class" at the 2003 European Social Forum on a large constructed wall (complete with graffiti and stencils). In an apparent privileging of Negri's perspective Vilensky only includes footage of his speech (Callinicos remains an unseen challenger). Vilensky's camera pans the crowd of participants who form a sea of faces listening attentively to the debate. Rather than existing as a passive mass this crowd (like one would expect of a multitude) interjects, argues and challenges Negri's English translator (eventually replacing her) exhibiting all the attributes of "a whole of singularities" which cannot be reduced to a single collective unit. This is the multitude - a collection of worker's students, unemployed, migrants and refugees - who provide the "one no" and "many yeses" of the global justice movement.

But in a complicated and inconclusive gesture Vilensky also includes a second projection, on the rear of the screen, of Russian workers labouring on the factory assembly line. So whilst the viewer sees Negri explain to the crowd the growth and centrality of immaterial labour we also stare into the faces of those workers who still sweat it out as material labourers. The weight of Callinicos's argument remains present.

In an honest attempt to come to grips with the legacy of totalitarian socialism Russian born Vilensky probes what it means today to "set up house in the heart of the multitude."

He confronts head on some of the more rigid interpretations of Marxism, the staple diet of Soviet socialism, which privileged the universal subject position of the heroic and unchanging working class. But he also eschews any easy abandonment of the concept of the working class tout court. In a country which has undergone a deeply traumatic transition to capitalism, with an exponential growth in unemployment, corruption and capitalist exploitation of labour Vilensky remains alert to the experience of work for those, particularly in less developed economies, who remain caught in the cycle of old fashioned material labour.

The Negation of the Negation provides a complex and nuanced way into a discussion of the multitude. Vilensky, in challenging the viewer to think through how we understand the notion of working class, provides a uniquely critical response to globalization. In this sense he achieves his stated aim of creating art which "disrupts the established order, giving rise to creative chaos, from which utopian forms for a new society can emerge".

4. Special edition of What is to be done, produced for the exhibition Cycle Tracks will Abound in Utopia, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Vilensky, D August 2004.