A postmodern book

The French edition of Empire opens with the statement that this book is ‘an attempt to write a new “Communist Manifesto” for our times’. The same claim is repeated in the feature dedicated to the subject of the POLITICAL MANIFESTO¹ (I call ‘features’ those short chapters appearing in italics throughout the book). Frankly, I’m not totally clear as to why Empire should aspire to belong to the genre of the ‘manifesto’ when, as a matter of fact, it takes the form of a new literary genre – one which is much more in tune with our times. A ‘manifesto’ – be it political, artistic or philosophical – is, by definition, brief, original and radical. Empire is something quite different; in fact, it’s the opposite of a manifesto.

To start with, it is certainly not brief; it is a ‘mammoth’ of a book, almost 500 pages long. Absit iniuria verbis: to be fair, Marx’s Capital is a ‘mammoth’ work too, in fact much more so; a work which has shaped history (and not only the history of thought), perhaps to an even greater extent than The Communist Manifesto

ever did. But *Capital* is a rich and systematic work, and as such it must be read from start to finish, and only in this order, if one is to understand correctly its structure of argument (it was no accident that Marx gave such a lot of thought to the issue of *presentation*, that is, to the difficulties of translating into a sequential discourse a conceptual construction articulated in such a complex way). *Empire* bears no resemblance to *Capital*: leaving aside its size, it is a lightweight cultural production, inside which readers can ‘navigate’ with a certain degree of freedom.

What *Empire* resembles more closely are other, more recent, ‘mammoths’ coming in the main from the United States; I’m thinking here about books such as *The End of Work* by Jeremy Rifkin, or *The End of History and The Last Man* by Francis Fukuyama. *Empire* shares with such books a strong argument (I would say a clearly *exaggerated* argument), a wide-ranging but lightweight narrative, a popularising tone, numerous but rarely explored references and, above all, the quality of functioning almost as a *hypertext*. Indeed, here the strong argument almost becomes a mantra, so as to function as an easily identifiable (and easily expendable) slogan while, at the same time, becoming a link for accessing the various sets of arguments in the book that remain relatively independent from one another. The whole structure of *Empire* lends itself well to a reading in chunks and in any order whatsoever, without its fundamental meaning being affected in any considerable way. Indeed, the thought of the two authors can be assimilated in various ways and on various levels.

(i) *By slogan*: in other words, by only learning the links, those keywords the grasp of which is anyway sufficient to spell out your allegiances to a certain ‘movement’ (I don’t wish to use the word ‘ideology’ here, which is too loaded with negative meaning). Keywords such as *alterity, autonomy, biopower, bodies, communication, communism, corruption, desire, deterritorialization, discipline, desertion, empire, exodus, hybridization, immanence, multitude*, etc. This listing is obviously not a complete one and its compiling—in alphabetical order, no less— is not of my making: the index at the end of the volume reflects a far from conventional choice, including names and keywords. As such, it is yet another tool for the hypertextual reading of the book (here’s a useful hint for all those who should choose to use *Empire* ‘by slogan’: in the index, the nested terms are in effect also all the strategic keywords you need).

(ii) *By partial arguments*: in other words, by selecting the set of arguments