

AI, Work & Power: Four Reflections by Political Theorist Michael Hardt



The Duke University professor shared his analysis of the effects of automation on labor's power with students and faculty.

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Who wields power in the age of **automation**? In response to this question, **Michael Hardt** shared his perspective with faculty and students as part of the **35th anniversary** celebration of the Bachelor's Degree in International Relations at the [Tec's State of Mexico campus](#).

Hardt is a professor at [Duke University](#) in North Carolina, United States, where he has been recognized for his contributions to the **study of power**, globalization, and new forms of **social organization**, in addition to his work as a **political theorist**.

In a world where **artificial intelligence** (AI) and technology are transforming the workplace, **Hardt** called for a rethinking of the relationship between humans, machines, and economic systems, focusing on the **social implications** of

technological advances.

*“To build **effective relationships**, humanity and **human interaction** are essential. The world wasn’t made for machines. We’re the ones who **developed them**”, he said.*

*Michael Hardt during his keynote lecture *Labor and the Automation of Intelligence* at the Tec’s State of Mexico campus. Photo: AM Studios*



During his **keynote address**, *Labor and the Automation of Intelligence*, the co-author of works such as *Empire* and *Commonwealth* presented **four key ideas** for understanding the relationship between power, technology, and labor.

1. Automation: A driver of power redistribution

For **Michael Hardt**, automation cannot be understood solely as a **technical advancement** aimed at efficiency, but rather as a **tool** that has historically been used to **reorganize power** within the productive system.

In this regard, he explained that every **wave of innovation**, from industrial mechanization to **artificial intelligence**, has had a direct impact on workers' **bargaining power**.

Mass automation, he noted, not only replaces tasks but also reduces **autonomy** and weakens collective structures.

*"We must be able to distinguish between **subject and object**. The main problem is that we're **investing more in objects** than in people, which **reduces the power** of workers and increases that of machines",* said **Hardt**.

Although he acknowledged that technology also creates **new jobs**, he cautioned that these tend to involve **less influence**. In other words, jobs are not disappearing, but they are becoming more **fragmented**, which leads to less political power.

From this perspective, the **key question** is not how many jobs are created or lost, but **who gains power** in the process.



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2. Conditional systems

Another of **Hardt's** ideas was the changing relationship between **humans and their tools**. Drawing on ideas dating back to the 19th century, he explained how a line of reasoning that once **seemed self-evident** has been turned on its head.

He said that while in other **historical periods** tools were **extensions of the human body** and will, today's technological systems, especially those based on data and algorithms, tend to **structure work**, dictate its pace, and limit decision-making.

According to the scholar, this change means that, in many cases, workers **no longer use the tool itself**, but rather operate within a system that **imposes predefined conditions**.

For **Hardt**, understanding this reversal is essential. He points out that it is not merely a **philosophical question** but a key point for analyzing **new forms of control** in the contemporary workplace.

*"If we want to understand what **kinds of work** might emerge from these changes and the implementation of automation, we can **look to the past**", he said.*

After his lecture, Michael Hardt spent some time with the students. Photo: AM Studios



3. Mass intellectuality

Faced with this situation, **Hardt** does not present a pessimistic outlook but rather sees an **opportunity for transformation**. In his analysis, the value of work today lies not only in material production, but also in people's **intellectual and creative abilities**.

He refers to this phenomenon as **mass intellectuality**, a form of **collective intelligence** that generates value through knowledge, collaboration, and **accumulated experience**.

Unlike industrial value, this value is not easily quantifiable, as it focuses on collective **qualities and capabilities**, which, as he emphasized, are **transferable** across sectors.

In other words, they are not tied to a single task or industry, which **opens up the possibility** of exploring new, more flexible, and dynamic ways of **organizing work**.

In this context, networks and connectivity play a key role, enabling not only new **forms of production** but also new forms of **social connection and interaction**, which can strengthen this **collective intelligence**.



Josefina Cortés, Regional Dean of the School of Social Sciences and Government for the Tec's campuses in Mexico City. Photo: AM Studios

4. The loss of habits

Going beyond the economic or political sphere, **Hardt** shifted the discussion to a more human level. He noted that one of the **most significant effects** of automation is the transformation or **disappearance of everyday habits**.

*“**Human habits** are what give life rhythm, meaning, and fulfillment. For this reason, the loss of certain **forms of work** implies not only a change in production but also a shift in the **human experience**”, **Hardt** said.*

With this in mind, the **Duke University** professor posed a question, if technology allows us to perform **complex tasks** with perfect results, what role is left for **human intellect**, which is inherently imperfect?

For **Hardt**, the answer does not lie in **competing with machines** but in reaffirming what makes us human — the ability to **build relationships**, create meaning, and engage with the world through **experiences**.

“The world wasn’t made for machines. We’re the ones who developed them”.- Michael Hardt.

Michael Hardt concluded his remarks by emphasizing how important it is for workers to gain a deep understanding of their tools and **change their habits** in order to transform **technological systems** and shift the balance of power in their favor.

During the event, **Josefina Cortés**, Regional Dean of the **School of Social Sciences and Government** for the Tec’s campuses in Mexico City, highlighted the value of **collective thinking** as a cornerstone of academia.

“We’re holding this event with a focus on reflection and informed discussion. When it comes to academia, we must work on **three levels**: understanding, being, and know-how,” Cortés concluded.

The **keynote lecture**, *Labor and the Automation of Intelligence*, was part of the events held to mark the **50th anniversary of the Tec’s presence** in Mexico City.

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