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INNOVATION AND NEGATION

Steven Shaviro

Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation by Paolo Virno. Trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008. Pp. 188. \$14.95 paper.

Paolo Virno's newly translated book, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*, is somewhat misleadingly titled, since it has very little to say about the concept of the *multitude* as featured in Virno's previously translated book, as well as in the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Rather, it is a text composed of three essays: a longish one about jokes and the logic of innovation, flanked by two much shorter ones that deal with the ambivalent legacy of humanity's linguistic powers.

The first essay argues against the notion, crystallized by Carl Schmitt but held more generally in the "common sense" of political philosophy and conceptual thought (from Hobbes, we might say, through Freud, right down to Steven Pinker), that any democratic or liberatory political theory is founded in the naïve view that human nature is innately harmonious and good, whereas the more "realistic" view of the human capacity for "evil" mandates belief in a strong and repressive state. Virno argues, to the contrary, that if we are to worry about the "evil" in human nature—which is really our "openness to the world," or our underdetermination by our biology, which is what makes it possible for us to have "a virtually unlimited species-specific ambivalence"—then we have all the more reason to worry about what happens when the power to act (to do evil as well as to mitigate it) is concentrated in something like the state's "monopoly of violence."

Theorists of the state, from Hobbes to Schmitt, posit the transition from a state of nature to a civil state, involving the rule of a sovereign (in the conservative version), or the rule of law (in the liberal version), as a defense against this innate aggressiveness that would be endemic to the state of nature. But Virno says that this transition is never complete; even a sovereignty based on laws still has to declare a “state of exception” in order to maintain its rule; and this state of exception is, in effect, a return to the never-surpassed “state of nature.” The state of exception is a state in which rules are never firm, but are themselves subject to change and reinvention. We move back from the fixed rules to the human situation that gave rise to them in the first place. Though the “state of exception” has often been described as the totalitarian danger of our current situation, it is *also* a state in which the multitude can itself elaborate new practices and new forms of invention.

The third essay in the book makes a similar argument, in a somewhat simpler form. Sympathy with others of our kind is an innate biological endowment of our species—here Virno makes reference to recent discoveries involving mirror neurons. But language frees us, for both good and ill, from this state of sympathy. Language gives us the power of negation, which is the ability to deny the humanity of the other (the Jew, the “Musselman,” the nonwhite) and hence to torture and kill them

mercilessly. Since there is no possibility of returning to a prelinguistic state, the only solution to this potentiality for evil is to potentialize language to a further level, make it go meta-, have it reflect back on itself, in a “negation of the negation.” The power to objectify and kill is *also* the power to heal, to establish “reciprocal recognition.” Just as the state of exception is the ambivalent locus both of tyrannical imposition and of democratic redemption, so the potentiality of language is the ambivalent locus both of murderous destruction and of the elaboration of community, or of the multitude.

But both of these essays are little more than footnotes to the long central essay, “Jokes and Innovative Action,” that comprises most of the book. Virno rather curiously takes Freud’s book on jokes as his primary text, despite disclaiming any interest in the Freudian theory of the unconscious. All of his examples of jokes come from Freud, but he reclassifies these jokes in terms of their status as public acts of expression (“performative utterances” in a way, though precisely they do not positively refer back to institutions in the way that a performative utterance like “I sentence you to a year in prison” does), as gestures that disrupt the “normal” functioning of a rule, and as “paralogisms” (logical fallacies, or defective syllogisms).

The point behind all these classifications is a Wittgensteinian one. Most of the time, in “normal” situations, we apply rules to concrete

situations unproblematically. But in fact a rule is never sufficient to dictate how it is to be applied in any situation whatsoever—any attempt to do so involves making a second rule to explain how to apply the first rule, then a third rule to explain how to apply the second rule, and so on in an infinite regress. There is always an incommensurability between abstract rules and pragmatic acts of applying those rules. We have to appeal, as Wittgenstein says, to actual practices in a given “form of life.” But these forms of life are themselves subject to change. A joke is a disruptive intervention in this process; it introduces an “aberrant” application of a rule, thus exposing to view the inherent incommensurability between rule and application. It throws us back upon the “form of life” in which the language game of which the rule is a part is embedded. It exposes the contingency of the form of life, the way it could be otherwise. It returns us to what Wittgenstein calls “the common behavior of humankind.”

Virno interprets this “common behavior” to be our species-specific biological endowment (basic “human nature”)—or the “regularities” of human behavior that ultimately underlie all rules, but which explicit rules cannot fully encompass. The gap between an explicit rule and the way we can apply it refers back to this prior gap between rules and the regularities upon which they are based, but which they are never able to encompass. This is in turn

the case because Virno, as we have seen, defines basic human, species-specific, and biological regularities not as a fixed “nature” but precisely as an underdetermination, a reservoir of potentiality—something whose incompleteness can only be given fixed form by the still-more-indeterminate, and still-more-open-to-potentiality, power of language. Language is what fixes our biological potentiality into specific forms, but it is also (as jokes witness) what allows us to rupture any given fixity and reconfigure things otherwise. Wittgenstein’s return to the “regularity” of empirically observed human nature as the court of last appeal for what cannot be guaranteed or grounded by rational argument is also a kind of return to the state-of-exception-as-state-of-nature, or to the moment when language first emerges out of our innate drives, both reshaping and giving form to these drives, and opening them up to a still more radical indeterminacy.

Virno claims that this is what is happening, in miniature, in jokes when they twist intentions and laws, multiply meanings, and turn seemingly fixed principles into their opposites, or into sheer absurdity. He therefore takes the joke as a miniaturized version, or as a paradigm case, of innovation and creativity in general. The way that jokes play with and disrupt previously fixed and accepted meanings is a small version of the way that any form of social innovation or creativity alters relations that were

previously taken for granted or seen as fixed.

Ultimately, Virno says that jokes and all forms of social innovation play on the indeterminacy between grammatical statements and empirical statements—an indeterminacy that is the major focus of Wittgenstein's last writing, collected in the volume *On Certainty*. Wittgenstein says, on the one hand, that certain statements are not in themselves either true or false, because they express the presuppositions that we are already taking for granted and pointing back to when we make any judgment of truth or falsity. For Wittgenstein, it is a weird category error to assert the truth of a statement like "I know that I have two hands," because we do not "know" this so much as we already presuppose it whenever we learn something, or come to know something. My sense of having two hands is precognitive (which is precisely why I do not have to check all the time to make sure that I really do have two hands, neither more nor less).

On the other hand, however, and at the same time, Wittgenstein says that this pre-knowledge is not absolute. Over time, there can be shifts in which sorts of statements are empirical ones (that can be true or false), and which statements are foundational or grammatical ones (already presupposed in an act of cognition). I might lose one of my hands in a horrible accident, for instance. Or some empirical fact might become so central to my understanding of

everything that it would come to take on the form of a pre-assumed (grammatical) statement, rather than a merely empirical one. These things can and do change over the course of time. One language game morphs or mutates into a different one. For Virno, this is where social innovation takes place. Jokes are the simplest example of such a process of change: one in which "an openly 'fallacious' conjecture . . . reveals in a flash a different way of applying the rules of the game" (163), and thereby changes the nature of the game altogether, or allows us to stop playing one game and to play a different one instead. Virno expands this reading, in order to suggest that it really comprises a theory of *crisis* in Wittgenstein, so that his naturalism is something more than just a passive cataloging of various "forms of life"—something, he says, that is "stubbornly ignored by all of Wittgenstein's scholars" (163).

How useful and convincing is all of this? To my mind, the best part of Virno's argument is the last thing I mentioned: his parsing of Wittgenstein on the shadowy and always-changing boundary between the "grammatical" and the "empirical." I think this is a more informal and naturalistic version of what Deleuze calls "transcendental empiricism." At any given moment there is a transcendental field that determines what is possible and what is not, and that delineates for us the shape of the empirical (which cannot be interpreted without it).

At the same time, not only is this “transcendental field” not an absolute (in Kant’s language, as transcendental it is precisely not transcendent), but it is also itself something that has an empirical genesis within time, and that varies through time.

Now, doubtless this always-open possibility of shifting the boundary between the empirical and the transcendental, or of turning one into the other, is where creativity and innovation are located. The bad, or mainstream, interpretation of Kant is the one that always insists upon the necessity of separating the transcendental (the regulative, the norm) from the empirical—that is how you get Habermas, for instance. A much better Kantianism is the one—it can be found explicitly in Lyotard, for instance; and I would argue that it also works implicitly in Whitehead and in Deleuze—that sees the gap or incommensurability between the transcendental/regulative and the empirical not as a barrier so much as a space that is sufficiently open as to allow for innovative transformation.

So to this extent I find Virno’s formulations (including his reading of Wittgenstein) extremely useful. But I also find his discussion curiously bland and incomplete, and this because of its failure (due to its “naturalistic” orientation?) to say enough either about aesthetics, or about political economy. I think, on the one hand, that the view of creativity and innovation implicit in Virno’s discussion needs to be thought

at greater length within the framework of a post-Kantian aesthetics, and that this aesthetics needs to be affirmed precisely against the temptation (all too common in current academic discourse) to render it in “ethical” terms. (This is an argument that needs to be set forth in detail, but I lack the space to do it here). On the other hand, I find Virno’s silence on matters of political economy quite disappointing in someone who explicitly presents himself as a Marxist or post-Marxist philosopher. Rather than deepening a sense of how we might understand the “multitude” in the framework of contemporary global capitalism, Virno opts for a much vaguer, and context-free, understanding of how social and cultural change is possible. He prefers to speak in terms of the state, and of the foundations of law and sovereignty, rather than in terms of modes and relations of production. I know my position here is an unpopular one, but I am enough of a “vulgar Marxist” to think that these sorts of political-philosophy distinctions are too vague and abstract to have any sort of traction when they are separated from “economic” considerations. (Again, this is an argument that needs to be pursued at greater length than I have the space to do here.)

But the limitations of Virno’s argument in this respect are most evident when he discusses the forms of social change. Basically, he lists two. One of them is “exodus”: the Israelites, faced with the choice between

submitting to the Pharaoh and rebelling against him, instead made the oblique move of leaving Egypt altogether. This, for Virno, is the exemplary situation of changing the parameters of what is possible, changing the rules of the game instead of just moving within an already-given game or form of life. The obvious reference, beyond the Bible, is to the Italian “autonomist” movement of the 1960s/1970s, which is the point of origin for Virno’s thought just as it is for Negri’s. Now, much as I admire the emphasis on obliqueness rather than on dialectical oppositions, I also suspect that the idea of “exodus” is a too easy one—in the sense that when capitalism subsumes all aspects of contemporary life, outside the factory as well as inside, it is actually as difficult to find a point of exodus as it is easy to make the declaration that one is doing so. “Lateral thinking” is a business buzzword more than an anticapitalist strategy. Things like “open software” and “creative commons” copyright licenses are not anywhere near as radical as they sound—if anything, they not only coexist easily with a capitalist economy, but also presuppose a capitalist economy for their functioning. All too often, what we celebrate as escapes from the capitalist machine in fact work as comfortable niches within it.

But Virno’s other form of change, “innovation,” is even more problematic. It seems to me to be symptomatic that Virno introduces his discussion of what he calls *entrepreneurial*

innovation with the disclaimer that this involves “a meaning of the term ‘entrepreneur’ that is quite distinct from the sickening and odious meaning of the word that is prevalent among the apologists of the capitalist mode of production” (148); and yet, immediately after this caveat, he goes on to explain what he means by “entrepreneurial innovation” by referring to the authority of Joseph Schumpeter, the one theorist of the entire twentieth century who is most responsible for the “sickening and odious” meaning that Virno ostensibly rejects. Virno insists that, for Schumpeter, “it would be a mistake to confuse the entrepreneur with the CEO of a capitalistic enterprise, or even worse, with its owner.” This is because, for Schumpeter, entrepreneurship is “a basically human aptitude . . . a species-specific faculty.” However, this disclaimer will not stand. On the one hand, the entrepreneur is not the same as the CEO or owner, only because the former refers to a moment of “invention,” whereas the latter refers to an already-established enterprise. When the businessman ceases to innovate actively, and instead simply reaps the fruits of his market dominance, then he has become a CEO instead of an entrepreneur. Bill Gates was a Schumpeterian entrepreneur in the 1970s; by the 1990s he had become just another CEO. The owners of Google, whose innovations surpassed those of Microsoft, are now making the same transition. Even if the entrepreneur

is not yet a CEO, his actions are intelligible only in the framework of a capitalist economy. If the entrepreneur is successful, then he inevitably becomes a CEO. To say that Schumpeterian entrepreneurship is a basic human aptitude is precisely to say (as Virno doesn't want to say) that capitalism is intrinsic to, and inevitably a part of, human nature.

I think that Virno's reference to Schumpeter is symptomatic, because it offers the clearest example of how he fumbles what seems to me to be one of the great issues of our age, which is, precisely, how to *disarticulate* notions of creativity and innovation and the new from their current hegemony in the business schools and in the ways that actually existing capitalism truly functions. Virno fails to work through this disarticulation, precisely because he has already preassumed it. I myself don't claim by any means to have solved this problem—the fact that we can neither give up on innovation, creativity, and the new, nor accept the way that the relentless demand for them is precisely the motor that drives capitalism and blocks any other form of social and economic organization from being even minimally thinkable—but I feel that Virno fails to acknowledge it sufficiently *as* a problem. In consequence, for all that his speculation in this book offers a response to the Hobbesian or Schmittian glorification of the state, it doesn't offer any response to the far more serious problem of our subordination to the

relentless machinery, or monstrous body, of capital accumulation.

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