# BOOK NOTE

## Paolo Virno. *Essay on Negation: towards a linguistic anthropology*. Translated by Lorenzo Chies

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The book of Professor Paolo Virno has been translated from Italian into English with a grant from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. It consists of five chapters, the first of which is entitled 'Prologue' and described by the author as "in many ways akin to a theatre rehearsal." The first chapter can, so it seems, be considered as a condensation of what is to be unfolded in the rest of the book. The essential idea behind its concept is that negation, as a logical-linguistic phenomenon, has important anthropological, ethical, and political implications. Saying that something is not the case implies detaching oneself from a propositional content, and from its associated emotion. In his elaboration, the author comes up with three interacting hypotheses that reveal his dialectic orientation. In the first place, he refers to the existence of an original, pre-individual inter-subjectivity. This 'pre-subjective,' 'we-centric' stage is characterized by the activation of 'mirror neurons' in the brain, that are responsible for the human sense of preliminary sociality and empathy, as discovered by Vittorio Gallese. This early social awareness is threatened by the second stage, which is the linguistic one, and aims at scattering it through the possibility of saying 'no.' Far from agreeing with Noam Chomsky who opposed the benign creativity of language to the violence and iniquity of power, Virno situates the potential destruction of primary collective harmony in language itself, particularly as it culminates in the possibility of denying recognition to one's neighbor.

Making analogies with Kant's 'radical evil' and Hegel's 'unhappy conscious-ness', the author briefly points at his major sources of inspiration for the continuation: Saussure (for linguistics), Piaget (for experimental psychology) and Plato (for philoso-phy, in particular *the Sophist*, in which negation – as confirmation of difference, not necessarily of contrariness – is said to occupy a central position.) In the third place, the author identifies the 'public sphere' as the antidote against language's 'poison:' the negation of the negation occurs as – referring to Saint Paul – a form of *katéchon*, or 'prevention of destruction', 'restoration'. The author follows Saussure where this one defines language as a system of oppositional relations between signs that have no intrinsic value beyond their contrast with other signs. However, he is at least also as

close to Frege, of whom he says that "we should declare: not everything he says is right, but he is almost never wrong" (p.55). Indeed, Virno categorically distinguishes between 'proposition' (that can be used in either an affirmative or a negative sentence) and 'propositional attitude'. Negation is, then, something that affects linguistic content, not reality, nor its mental representation, that are totally different things. Virno also distinguishes 'sense' from 'denotation', in which the former corresponds more or less to the 'meaning' or 'proposition', while the latter refers to the spatial and temporal context in which this sense is being used; in the case of a negative proposition, what this does is to simply deny that there is any denotation at all. Drawing inspiration from Wittgenstein, who denied the possibility of negation to refer to a picture, since 'pictures' aren't 'saying' anything, the author develops a comment on the famous painting of Belgian painter René Magritte, featuring a pipe, and carrying the title 'This is not a pipe' ('*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*'), not only as an example of the discrepancy between representation and reality, but also to illustrate how language can make a picture 'say' something, as it complements and integrates it. Continuing his clarification of negation as 'exclusive prerogative of verbal thought', the author illustrates the 'neutrality' of sense by illustrating how it may become the object of a question, an interrogation, that is neither affirmative nor negative, but necessitates either one or the other as answer. In another approach, he shows how the modality of 'It is possible that…' doesn't affect semantic content, but implies the coexistence of both the negative and affirmative variety. In the chapter on Plato's *Sophist*, the focus is on why young children appear to struggle with 'negative' facts, given that their experiences are being perceived as consistently positive, fact-based or action-oriented. Piaget had, indeed, declared that children are 'unable' to speak in the 'negative'; in some sense, they are pre-consciously giving credit to Parmenides, for whom language can only state 'what is'. However, Virno adds that sometimes, what is not, has, in some respect, being! Likewise, comparing two sets of verbs mentioned by Wittgenstein, one expressing language-based activities (such as promising and telling jokes), the other non-language-based actions (including walking, eating and avoiding pain), negation is identified as what forms the bridge between them.

The book does not offer a proper conclusion, but rather ends with the presentation of appendices that highlight specific problems like 'negative actions' – or actions that consist in doing something by not-doing or omitting something – and the 'double negation' ('not…not…'). Virno draws inspiration from Ryle and Aquinas, who tend to deny that omissions and renunciations have the same value as creative actions, but ends up refuting their position; indeed, not carrying out an action restores its state as 'mere possibility' which is a necessary prelude to affirmative action at a later time. Double negation, which the author brands as "a resource for praxis", rather than a cognitively relevant playing with words (particularly involving the 'not' or negative prefixes of adjectives like 'non-' and 'in-') means more than just correcting an erroneous use of 'not'. Focusing on the stylistic and pragmatic value of the double negation, the author believes that statements that contain them are rather 'felicitous' or 'infelicitous' ('defective') than simply 'true' or 'false', bringing them under the banner of 'performative

language' in Austin's terminology. It is questionable, however, whether this can be generalized; a consideration of the context in which a double negation is used (a lecture in logic hasn't the same focus and ambition as a literary critique) may clarify the motive behind a double negation.

The work of Virno may be considered as a creative approach to a common, but often improperly understood linguistic phenomenon: negation. In this aspect, it has offered a positive contribution to areas involving philosophy of language, philosophy of science, logic and metaphysics. Precisely this multi-angle approach makes it hard to classify the book in any of the mentioned fields. The prologue started with the formulated intention to approach linguistic negation as an anthropological phenomenon. To some extent this has been realized, for instance in the chapter on negation and affects, where the interplay between the 'not' and various emotions is being explored: "The 'not' suspends the feeling of attraction, but does not replace it with a heterogeneous feeling. The outcome is non-attraction, that is, blocked attraction, which nevertheless remains what it is, and does not turn in something else." (p.223). This contrasts, however, with passages where the 'not' is strictly reserved to the field of language and logic, and in which language "is nothing else than a collection of virtually unlimited oppositional relations between terms that, importantly, do not have any reality before their reciprocal opposition, or outside of it" (p.25). Language as 'system' hasn't anything to do with human emotions, which is also reflected in the opposition between 'sense' and 'denotation' that the author is upholding throughout the book, and in which the 'not' belongs to the 'system': "Far from extending the opposition between physical forces or the contrast between psychological drives, the syntactic connective 'not' has a *reflexive* genesis, since it refers above all to certain basic prerogatives of the system to which it belongs" (p.53), and "negation is the analytic property that specifically determines *the meaning of the word 'meaning'*" (p.112). In spite of the wide spectrum of applications in which the term 'not' is being situated, the book of Virno maintains its unity of object, while the originality of its concept lies in its combinatory power of perspectives and abundance of details; fundamental as it may be in human conversation and thought, the 'negative' definitely got the affirmative attention that it deserves '!

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