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# Modifying the Grammar. Paolo Virno's Works on Virtuosity and Exodus

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*Exodus is the transfer to political praxis of the heuristic procedure, [. . .] which the mathematicians define as 'variation of data': giving precedence to secondary or heterogeneous factors, we move gradually from a determined problem: subjection or insurrection, to a totally different problem: how to realize a defection and to experience forms of self-government which were previously inconceivable.*<sup>[1]</sup>

Although it is not necessarily always evident, and although echoes of the contemporary French line of poststructuralism are also discernible in his thinking, Paolo Virno's philosophy is rooted in those workers' struggles that took place in Italy during the 1960s and '70s—when engagements in the large factories of Turin and elsewhere were giving rise to practical and theoretical confrontations with new transformations in capitalist modes of accumulation and production (the likes of which shape the world we know today). These confrontations found their articulation in *operaismo* (Italian workerist theory) and, later, *autonomia* (autonomism), where the lines between word and action were never too clearly drawn. Indeed, as a young man, Virno was active in the autonomist group *Potere Operaio* (Workers' Power) and was arrested in 1979 in a government sweep that led to the jailing of many members of the radical Left; he spent three years in prison before being acquitted. Virno's lifelong commitment to philosophical questions, in other words, correlates with his political engagement.

As performativity has recently been more discussed in art contexts, the name Paolo Virno has been mentioned with ever-greater frequency, especially regarding his theory of virtuosity. For Virno, virtuosic activity is any activity that, firstly, *finds its own fulfillment and its own purpose in itself*, without objectifying itself into an end product. Secondly, it is *an activity that requires the presence of others*; it exists only in the presence of an audience.<sup>[2]</sup> This is a notion whose pertinence to contemporary art is clear enough. But here a concept that was initially intended to comprise all modes of production is at risk of being narrowed to comprise only the field of art. (Much the same happened about fifteen years ago with Judith Butler's theory of the performative.) If it is cautiously done, this sort of transposition of terms from a broader discourse to a narrower one makes sense. But in Virno's case an important component is quickly lost—namely, his specific connection of the performative-virtuosic with the public sphere, with the concept of the political, and with new post-Fordist forms of labor.

In his book *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2004), which for English-speaking readers is probably his best-known work, Virno describes the migration of the political from the public sphere into the realms of production. He explains this subsuming of political agency into the labor process specifically with his concept of virtuosity. The latter is one of the essential preconditions of the current order of production, he believes, to the extent that it is also connected to the emergence of a new historical-political subject: the post-Fordist multitude. In post-Fordist capitalism, labor increasingly develops into a virtuosic performance that does not objectify itself into an end product; at the same time, this virtuosic form of labor demands a space that is structured like the public sphere. What defines a fundamental aspect of the political for Hannah Arendt—the presence of others, the exposure of oneself to the gaze of others, the necessity of cooperation and communication—now become fundamental qualities of labor.

Philosophical terms like *virtuosity* and *performativity* that are removed from their commonplace connotations can indeed be applied to artistic or political practices as well,<sup>[3]</sup> but this requires a certain sensitivity and sometimes also the artistic actualization of the terms. An example of such sensitivity and actualization is Marcelo Expósito's video *Primero de Mayo (La Ciudad-fábrica)* (First of May [The City Factory]), 2004,<sup>[4]</sup> in which the Spanish artist and activist outlines a complex introduction to the shift from the Fordist paradigm of the factory to the post-Fordist paradigm of virtuosic cognitive and affective labor. He takes as his model the Fiat factory Lingotto, a proud center of automobile production in the 1930s and now—having been transformed into a multifunctional hotel and conference center—a hotbed of the service industry and an example of the *fabbrica diffusa*. (The operaist term refers to the factory that has been diffused into the city, into the private spheres, into the forms of life.) Expósito shows in expressive, detailed imagery the transformations of the political and of modes of production that Virno describes: Whereas workers in the Fordist assembly lines of Lingotto are busy with serial car production, in Lingotto's post-Fordist setting, where it is a multifunctional conference center, the car has become a kid's toy and labor has turned into the affective labor of a care worker playing with the kid. Running parallel to this level of production in the video, different forms of resistance are shown, from the factory strike to activist interventions in the city (since the city itself might be called the post-Fordist factory); from the wooden shoe inserted into the machinery as an act of sabotage to the figure of the hacker who interrupts the machinery of communication; from the strikes at the Fordist factory to the Euromayday movement, a transnational renewal of the political praxis of the First of May.<sup>[5]</sup>

And yet, a closer reading of *A Grammar of the Multitude* leads to the suspicion that Virno, contrary to the perspective of his older colleague Antonio Negri, is more interested in grammar than in the multitude. His interest in questions of language philosophy, his emphasis on language as an undetermined score of the human animal—as an ever-mutable script of all the actions that human beings use to perform with their inherent intellectual and communicative potential—reinforces this reading. Nevertheless, Virno consistently conjoins these questions of language and intellect with components of a political philosophy through often surprising breaks and bridges. In Virno's most recent book, *Motto di spirito e azione innovativa* (2005), which will be published by Semiotext(e) this February as *Jokes and Innovative Action*, this strategy is brought to bear again. First of all, the book is a fundamental discussion of the “essence,” the “structure,” and the “logic” of the joke, consistently corresponding with the question of the genesis of creativity and innovative action. The point of departure is a language-philosophy reading of Freud's 1905 study *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Virno calls this book the most significant attempt to date to construct a taxonomy of jokes; as he notes, Freud approaches his subject in a virtually *botanical* way, and to some extent Virno does too, although his own procedure is strictly anti-Freudian. According to Virno, the joke is a diagram of innovative action. In broad-ranging philosophical reflections, especially on Aristotle, Wittgenstein, and Carl Schmitt, the Italian philosopher attempts to show us that the joke demonstrates how the world is to be transformed, modified, newly invented. As he does so, he reiterates and elaborates Freud's own theorization of the difference between the joke and the mere “comic situation,” forging a link that connects his own thinking on jokes to his previous formulations of virtuosic performance. Freud, Virno reminds us, stipulated that jokes require three people: “The first person, Freud says, is the author of the joke; the second is the object or the target of it; the third, ultimately, is its ‘audience,’ that is, the neutral spectator who evaluates the witty remark, understanding perfectly the meaning of the remark, and takes pleasure in it. The third person, superfluous or, worse yet, optional in the comical situation, is instead a *necessary* component of the joke.” And following all of these reflections—on the third person and the public sphere, on the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* (practical know-how), on the state of emergency and the state of exception—Virno, surprisingly, comes back to two of his familiar figures from *A Grammar of the Multitude*.

In *Jokes and Innovative Action*, these figures initially appear as the two fundamental types of jokes. For Virno, the two main forms of fallacy, which in turn give rise to the two primary genres of jokes, are *multiple use* and

*displacement*. And this twofold typology of jokes has what might be called a macroscopic equivalence: “[A]ll jokes, as well as endeavors to modify one’s form of life in a critical situation, are nourished *either* by the unusual combination of given elements *or* by an abrupt deviation toward ulterior elements.” Each type of joke, that is, corresponds analogically to a type of innovative action, which Virno respectively terms *entrepreneurship* and *exodus*. In order to better grasp this equivalency and these terms, one might first return to Virno’s reversal, in *A Grammar of the Multitude*, of Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s earlier theory of the culture industry. Whereas the two theorists from the Frankfurt School described the cultural field as society’s last area of retreat in the face of industrialization—accordingly regarding the culture industry as an obstinate latecomer in the Fordist transformation—Virno sees it as an anticipation and paradigm of post-Fordist production.<sup>[6]</sup> The culture industry, whose point is the production of communication by means of communication, is the matrix of post-Fordism, its central figure being that of the “mass virtuoso.” Virno’s example from the narrower sense of virtuosity: Glenn Gould hated performing before an audience and therefore withdrew to the recording studio, playing instead for a technical recording apparatus and cutting and remixing samples afterward. As Expósito demonstrates strikingly in his video, which also considers Gould’s practice, virtuosity occurs here less in the act of the performance of the “performing artist” than in Gould’s meticulous work of *recomposing* the material in postproduction.

A similar figure appears in *Jokes and Innovative Action* as an analogy to the first type of joke, the one reliant upon an “unusual combination of given elements.” This first, recombinant figure of innovation is the entrepreneur. The entrepreneur is not to be confused here with either a CEO or an owner of a capitalist enterprise (indeed, Virno finds this common connotation “sickening and odious”). Instead of an identity attributable to a person or a profession or a lasting condition, what is involved here is more of a function: a “species-specific faculty which becomes activated in the case of crisis or stagnation.” The entrepreneurial function is analogous to the *ars combinatoria* of the joke, its capacity to make varied use of the same verbal material. From this perspective, we see that creativity and innovation as Virno theorizes them arise not only from the small differences that accrue through repetition, but also from mistakes, false conclusions, and misjudgments.

The other fundamental type of joke, and its analogous type of innovation, derives from displacement. Virno writes: “[T]he logico-linguistic resources required to open up an unforeseen way out of Pharaoh’s Egypt are the same resources which nurture jokes (and para-logistic inferences) characterized by *displacement*, that is to say by an abrupt deviation in the axis of discourse.” At the linguistic level, displacement means changing the topic while a conversation is already proceeding along well-defined tracks. In the political field, displacement is actualized as leave-taking, as defection, as *exodus*. Virno emphasizes that he sees *exodus* as a collective action, which hinges on the para-logistic principle of *tertium datur*: a third way beyond any dialectical movement, an asymmetrical third possibility. As the quotation at the beginning of this article states, *exodus* is a nondialectical form of negation and resistance, or rather, of defecting and fleeing. Confronted with the question of whether they would submit to the pharaoh or openly rebel against his rule, the Israelites invent another possibility that could not have been conceived before: They flee.

The Italian/French legacy of the *exodus*, even if it no longer allows dreaming of a completely different outside, is not at all to be understood as harmless, individualist, or escapist-esoteric. “There is nothing more active than a flight!” as Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet wrote in the 1970s, and as Virno repeats almost literally in 2001: “Nothing is less passive than the act of fleeing, of exiting.”<sup>[7]</sup> What this form of innovation-as-exit involves is a dangerous,<sup>[8]</sup> positive form of defection, a fleeing that enables one to look for a weapon as one goes. Instead of presupposing relationships of domination as an immovable horizon and yet still fighting against them, this flight changes the conditions under which the presupposition occurs. The *exodus* transforms the context in which a problem has emerged, instead of treating the problem by deciding between given alternatives. As joke and as innovative action, *exodus*—the nonpassive, nondialectical, nonindividualist form of defection—opens up a side road, uncharted on

political maps, "to modify the very 'grammar' which determines the selection of all possible choices."

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[1] Paolo Virno, *Jokes and Innovative Action* (Los Angeles/New York: Semiotext(e), 2008). Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from this new book by Virno.

[2] Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (Los Angeles/New York: Semiotext(e), 2004).

[3] Virno himself concretizes the concept of the performative particularly in relation to the current social movements, which he therefore also calls "performative movements." Cf. "*Un movimento performativo.*" In this text, in 2005, Virno primarily analyzes the question of why the antiglobalization movement has not yet sufficiently bundled "those forms of struggle that are suitable for transforming the situation of precarious, short-term, and atypical labor into subversive political assets."

[4] Marcelo Expósito, "*Primero de Mayo (La Ciudad-fábrica)* [First of May (The City Factory)]" (61 minutes, 2004). Cf. [www.hamacaonline.net/obra.php?id=240](http://www.hamacaonline.net/obra.php?id=240).

[5] Cf. [euromayday.org](http://euromayday.org) and Gerald Raunig, "The Monster Precariat."

[6] Cf. also Gerald Raunig, "Creative Industries as Mass Deception."

[7] Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 70.

[8] Cf. Paolo Virno, "Anthropology and Theory of Institutions": "The dangerousness of our species is coextensive with its capacity to accomplish innovative actions . . . "