

REVIEW ARTICLE

Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory*

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Critique, indeed much of the academic practice in the humanities, is too often denigrated for a lack of *production*, or for a failure to contribute *positively* or affirmatively to society. These two bedfellows - production and positivity - are the watchwords of a culture that Benjamin Noys, in his book *The Persistence of the Negative*,¹ labels “affirmationism”; the practice or systematicity of the affirmative, whose hegemony paints the left intellectual tradition of critique with the demeanour of either *ressentiment* or a childish, reactionary penchant for destruction. These two stalemates of thinking political antagonism describe the Janus-faced image of the negative: an act or practice that on the one hand is seen to be a vehicle of pure and wanton destruction, and on the other is consumed by the pathos of defeatism; hence the adverse responses to a form which seems to contradict the injunctions to ‘proactivity,’ ‘thinking positive,’ and ‘creative solutions’—catchphrases that oil the wheels of cognitive capitalism. This affirmationist culture and its opposition to critique is perhaps a cliché, indeed a recurring fact throughout the history of philosophy. Yet the very recent threats of cuts to university funding in the U.K., the Netherlands and elsewhere focus the spectre of this culture all the more acutely, as the very life of the humanities in the university is under the (affirmative) axe based on the lack of marketable value. And yet this *culture* of affirmationism, the moral incitement of late 20th and early 21st century capitalism, is met by a consensus in much continental critical philosophy that itself downplays critique, indeed that seeks emphatically to break away from acts of negation, which is perceived to be incapable of engaging with political change. This repugnance for the negative manifests an internalised aggressiveness to the kind of political antagonism specific to critique, advocating its own affirmationist doctrine.

It is this culture of affirmationism and its “ideological mystifications” (ix) that Noys characterises as the shared ground between the constant injunction to capitalist production and the anti-capitalist imperative of key figures in critical theory in Europe and elsewhere since the 1960s. Noys prefaces his text with a focus on negativity and agency, however what is most striking—to reconfigure Noys’ characterisation of his own text—is the intervention that the text makes at the level of form. Working at and on the level of form to engage with the “dominant and largely unremarked [affirmationist] doxa” (ix), Noys seeks to recuperate the necessity of negation for thinking political antagonism. This recuperation of the negative is one of several recent considerations of negativity that seek to rest negation from an overdetermined traditional Hegelianism. These considerations include, perhaps most obviously, Ray Brassier’s reconsideration of nihilism against a prevailing *correlationalist* doxa as well as Catherine Malabou’s critique on the ideological confusions surrounding the “discovery” of neuroplasticity, which imply an endlessly affirmative plasticity as opposed to a brain equally capable of annihilation or of outbursts of rage exclusive to any prior or totalising plastic creativity.

The common ground between the capitalist injunction to productivity and affirmationism, the culture of affirmationism that I described above, is construed in Noys' text as a Nietzschean one. In Noys' argument Nietzsche is the "patron saint of affirmationism" (33), whose "horror of *ressentiment*" (39) leads to a moral injunction to the heroic, in Nietzsche's terms the *übermensch*, but also, Noys argues, the avant garde figure who "surg[es] forth" (54). Noys argues that it is this fear of *ressentiment* that serves to reify negation as a subject position or disposition, taming it into a thing. This misrecognition of the relation between negation and political antagonism also generates the inebriating negativity of 'accelerationism,' the tendency to "radicalise capitalism" in order to bring about its end (5). Noys' search for a persistence of the negative is not a polemic for a revolution without end either, a doctrine which itself bears too much resemblance to financial capitalism and the logic of positive externalities for Noys' comfort, a doctrine that forgoes preservation and conservation (169) and indeed appears to be a twin of anti-capitalist accelerationism (163). Rather, Noys demonstrates how negation may constitute an intervention that is not necessarily predetermined or subsumed by any initial affirmation, including the affirmation of accelerationism. Noys' rejection of an accelerationist position leads him to differentiate his work on negation from Brassier's position on nihilism, which, whilst associated in its attempt to unmoor philosophy from its attachment to affirming the already-manifest, is at risk of positing an *inevitable* post-capitalist subject (15). This is less a critique of Brassier, however, given that his work on nihilism is simply not concerned in the same way with positing a subject of nihil, than a way in which Noys clarifies his position regarding

The Persistence of the Negative deals with real abstraction in the sense that affirmationism is—to play on Sohn-Rethel's definition—not thought but the form of thought. In this sense, when I note Noys' intervention as occurring on the level of form, I refer to a reengagement with real abstraction as a central factor in the rehabilitation of negation. Indeed, affirmationism seems to be the *quality* of the concrete, the ideological mask—the disposition, even—of a reality which is above all that of presentation, of flexible specialisation and constant productivity. Thus the recuperation of an unimaginable positivity of negation without a prior affirmation is here less an argumentative point than a level of consciousness that is mirrored in the form of the text; one of those rare interventions that alters a field through detournement and transversal readings rather than staking a claim. It deals with real abstraction in the sense that affirmationism is not—to play on Sohn-Rethel's definition—not thought but the form of thought. Thus negation could not possibly be something that could be argued for in any simple sense: this would be utter folly, committing the same crime of reification that congeals the culture of negativity. Rather, as Noys puts it, "negativity only operates in the expropriation of positivities as a relation of rupture" (18), a figuring which describes the praxis of Noys' work as well as the antagonistic relations of its subject. This ensues a book that gathers transversal readings of key figures in contemporary continental philosophy. The chapters are organised around five key figures in contemporary thought, namely Derrida, Deleuze, Latour, Negri and Badiou, although the chapters include equally important and original discussions of negation, among them the work of Nietzsche, the Situationist International and Žižek. Noys rearranges continental theory based on their angles of resistance to the grain of capitalism, starting from an explicit political position yet crucially not subsuming negation to a teleological or idealist dialectic. Rather, Noys carries out his work through finding points of fissure in affirmationist tendencies, whose tempo feels psychoanalytic in the working at, and working on, the persistence of the negative.

It is this equation of critique with passivity, of negation with weakness and a disavowal of real action, which galvanises Noys' chapters on Derrida and Deleuze. Indeed, that an insistence on *thinking* political antagonism appears as a contradiction and a retraction from its very cause belies the timeliness and transversality of precisely this endeavour. Derrida appears as the most counter-intuitive figure to appear in the critique, and yet it is precisely Derrida's constant recourse to affirmationism to make political claims for deconstruction, to avoid the circumscription of deconstruction to inaction, that renders even the work of *différance* as ultimately a "weak affirmationism" (25). Noys claims that Derrida's equation of negation with affirmation is not simply a deconstruction of the negative but the subordination of the negative to affirmation. Indeed, even Derrida's reframing of the aporia as aporias is ultimately an affirmationist gesture (30).

From Derrida, as the “liminal figure” who heralded the “entrance into affirmationism” (135), Deleuze’s work, on the other hand, is formed in explicit opposition to negation, an opposition that is the “constant refrain of his work” (53). Noys traces Deleuze’s affirmationism actually reveals a split in Deleuze’s thought, contending that the affirmationist identity of Deleuze obscures the “lost political Deleuze” (53). Noys labels Deleuze’s contention that the negative is a false problematic because it ultimately can only add to affirmation a “*deus ex machina*” (57) that allows Deleuze to deny the persistence of the negative. Noys seeks to recuperate Deleuze’s characterisation of the potential “mutations” of structuralism (74) without automatically transfiguring these mutations as lines of flight—as modes accelerationism or affirmationism—but rather as just negation, a “determinate negation, which would refuse to simply take off into further accelerated mutations, but instead re-work and fissure such a ‘point’” (74). Thus Noys reconstructs Deleuze’s “disavowed” (53) negativity, to develop a “strategic thinking of subjectivity... one that would take into account negativity.” It is precisely to recuperate the possibility of “void points” as sites of subjectivation—a possibility that emerges in Deleuze’s essay on structuralism but is later repressed—emphatically this is not a solution for Noys but a better posing of the problem of the negative.

The acute problematics of negation as antagonism are caught between the (perceived) capitulation to passivity on the one hand and the no-mans lands of non-violence on the other. It is the later that comes into play most significantly in the sections on Latour and Negri. The quite paradoxical political position of non-violence, which, in its unacknowledged power position bears a resemblance to the position of the beautiful soul, retracts from negation under a moral injunction for preservation. Noys takes Latour to task for his own blindness to the ways in which his theories are conditioned by capitalist relations, radically undermining “capitalism” as just another object. In Latour’s formulation, the negation of revolution is never a true negation but only ever adds to the network or the deeply accelerationist litany of mediations (93-94).

This fear of the violent, as underlying a retraction from negation, is also present in the chapter on Negri. Indeed, as Noys details, it is the affirmation of the multitude (as concept or phenomenon) that inaugurates the capacity and conviction upon which anti-capitalist resistance emerges in Negri’s work (107-108). Negri and Hardt’s formulation of biopolitical power and resistance, whereby the greater or more extensive the system of biopower the greater the potential for resistance, situates them squarely in the realm of accelerationism. Negri is classified as accelerationist, a categorisation which again runs contrary to the prevailing perception of Negri as anti-capitalist revolutionary; thus we arrive at another nuance in Noys’ work: you can theorise anti-capitalist resistance and still retain an accelerationist position (114). In this section Noys deals predominantly with Negri’s formulation of constituent power in his 1992 work *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*. Constituent power emerges from a moment of rupture, and in Negri’s formulation it is the negative of constituted power. However, Noys shows that this primary rupture exists *only* as primary, without duration, before the affirmation of the constitutive power, which recasts Negri as possessing an intention to “envelop the negative” in positive creation. In this sense, Negri effectively performs the negation of the negation (126) meaning that Negri embraces negation paradoxically only as an opportunity for affirmation.

Where Derrida opened our engagement with affirmationism, the final chapter engages with Badiou as the “liminal figure for the exit from affirmation” (135), and Noys’ engagement with Badiou in the final section of his book produces the strongest and most distinct figuring of the work of negation. At the close of the first four chapters, we still remain with the question of how it is possible to think negation, when negation always seems to first require a moment or concession to affirmation. The question—against the Nietzschean injunction that the negative itself does not persist, but is dissolved in the act of negation—then becomes: how does the negative persist? Noys charts Badiou’s shift from insistence upon affirmationism to his re-engagement with the possibility of the negative, seizing this arc as the necessary philosophical move towards a persistence of the negative.

The chapter on Badiou is the key point at which Noys isolates the moment where “negation insinuates itself directly, as the essence of novelty” (145), finally offering the point at which negation is neither static, nor productive or creative in the cynical senses of the term. Thus Noys unfolds the way in which destruction

becomes negative negation for Badiou, and subtraction becomes affirmative negation and the combination of destruction and subtraction become the condition for the event. For Badiou, subtraction and destruction, the two forms by which the opening of the real can be accessed, exist in a hierarchical relation to each other: destruction is merely the defensive accessory to subtraction. Contra this hierarchy, Noys emphasises Badiou's revision of this hierarchy, at the same time arguing for a courage of the negative contra Badiou's explicit association of courage with heroics. Here, Noys performs his argument through *détournement*, demonstrating a labour of the negative, which is 'productive' through and determined by its act of negation without being tethered to the any prior affirmationism. For Noys, courage only as a "non-heroic political virtue" is the "subjective operator of negativity" (153). What Noys calls "strong consistency" is here the insistence of the persistence of the negative.

Noys appropriately finds the possibility of a politics of negativity within the terms of the patron saint of affirmationism, in the possibility of rethinking the *untermensch*, and his key point is to dissociate the work of negation from the 'posture' of the hero (41, 153). In this sense, one may wonder Noys also advocates a turn towards some kind of invisibility; his non-heroic subject to negation certainly seems to imply a critique of representation *in toto*, which seems to ring in time with the work of the Invisible Committee, for instance, and their reimagining of the commune and their own negative reading of spaces of flow.

These readings bear few matches in terms of patient workings through of such important thinkers in relation to the politics of form. Yet there is an important fissure in Noys' text itself, which focuses the problematic of negation particularly acutely. Affirmationism is a key political presupposition of both Latour and Negri's work, and thus Noys' chapters on these writers seems, in a way, to pick on easy targets. The response to this criticism is that it misses one of the more subtle points of Noys' *praxis* of negation: the point is that negation is a process of working through, which means working through and working at affirmationism through the insistence of the negative. This interchange reveals a wider friction that persists through Noys' text: either Noys is critiquing the conceptual and practical consequences of affirmationism, a project he seems to be carrying out in his chapters on Latour and Negri. In this case, we are dealing with a rigorous assessment of the philosopher's work and a critique of the political and conceptual consequences of their projects. On the other hand, in the chapters on Derrida and Badiou, Noys seems rather to focus on instances where the work of the negative is ultimately reincorporated into an affirmationist project. In this case it seems that Noys takes his examples as cases in point of the fact that the negative must be tied to a final affirmationism, as opposed to exhaustive readings of an affirmationist *tendency*, and then seeks to labour upon these points where the negative is coopted. In opposition to the overarching or counteraction of the negative, this means a working within the terms of affirmationism, whereby the action of the negative occurs only through the traversal of those terms. It is the chapters on Derrida and Badiou where negation as praxis comes through in the strongest way, although it is this shift in emphasis that seems to contradict the readings of Latour and Negri.

In the first instance, we seem to have an expansive reading, an easily recognisable critique, whereas in the latter there is the praxis of negativity that Noys is attempting to forge, a kind of intensive working of negation. It is this (presumably unintentional) divergence which suggests a crucial problematic for an enquiry into negation that must be foregrounded: the non-dialectical status of affirmationism (as consensus, as phenomenon) and negation (as praxis, which is not a blanket 'alternative' but rather operates) as the condition for a praxis of negation. Is there an irreconcilable split between a praxis of negation and a critique of affirmationism?

Noys' text constitutes a vital contribution to a resurrection of the negative as key to thinking political antagonism and will set a precedent for the decisive status of thinking the negative in the present. More importantly, perhaps, it is also an injunction to thinking political antagonism again, to a return to the level of form in order to address real abstraction in a way that is foreclosed by a prevailing affirmationist culture.

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NOTES

1. This and all parenthetical references are taken from: Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).