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Exodus. Paolo Virno and the Political Philosophy of Flight

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On November 7, Italian philosopher Paolo Virno passed away. We mourn the loss of a far-near friend and publish the essay "Exodus. Paolo Virno and the Political Philosophy of Flight," written 2006 as an introduction to a German-language compilation of Paolo Virno's texts on exodus as a political figure. [1]

Exodus is one of the central and recurring concepts in Paolo Virno's political philosophy, which the Italian philosopher developed since the early 1980s into a theoretical framework that extends beyond political theory. Virno's writings encompass not only an academic biography, but also that of a political activist who, from the outset, has attempted to combine his theoretical work with questions of social movements, social upheavals, and the possibility of new, alternative social orders. The majority of Virno's theoretical work has not yet been translated, so it will be a long time before a detailed examination of his theses and approaches can take place.

To date, the "political side" of his work has received more attention, including in Spanish- and English-speaking countries. His biography has certainly contributed to this, as has his involvement in the multifaceted Italian left, whose approaches, debates, actions, and issues have been repeatedly received and taken up beyond Italy since the 1970s. Virno was born in 1952 and was already active as a young man in the early 1970s in the *Potere Operaio* group and the *Autonomia* movement, for which he spent three years in prison until his acquittal. He thus fell victim to the unprecedented wave of repression that put thousands of political activists and intellectuals behind bars in 1979 and the following years. Many of these activists fled persecution to France, some to Germany and other countries.

This repression was a response not only to the explicitly violent, armed attack on the state, but also to the questioning of the prevailing social model and, above all, to the corrosive criticism of wage labor in Fordism. It shattered an extremely heterogeneous scene that had grown over 20 years and had become immensely diverse. This development began in the late 1950s, when a number of intellectuals, whose concerns and questions were not heard in the Communist Party nor in the trade unions, began to agree that subjectivity played an enormously important role in the advanced industrialized mode of production. However, there were hardly any theoretical instruments within the Marxist tradition for this insight.

From the outset, therefore, the aim was to formulate a theory of subjective resistance within the factory regime, and later within the school and university system, within the patriarchal family, the capitalist-structured city, and the system of cultural production. This resistance, according to the insight that founded so-called *operaismo (*from *the* Italian *operaio,* the worker), is not a reaction to

capitalist forms of exploitation, but the driving force of capitalist development itself. This brings into focus the individual and collective strategies of the daily struggle against the wear and tear of work at the machines, but also increasingly the question of constitution in the sense of the production of legal, cultural, and technical dispositifs, which were constantly being developed, questioned, and refined through debates inside and outside the factory. The focus was therefore not so much on the objective meaning of laws, but rather on the subjective way in which they were dealt with, as well as about access to cultural activities and the use of new techniques and technologies for one's own purposes.

This not only established links to Marxist theoretical currents, but also certain affinities with the works and activities of French philosophy, such as Félix Guattari's engagement in the field of institutional analysis or the theory of power in the sense of a technology of the self, as developed by Michel Foucault in the late 1970s. The question of the status of subjectivity *within* the capitalist exploitation process or *within* liberal, constitutional democracies ultimately leads to the problem of whether and, above all, how it is possible to overcome this form of society and find entirely new forms of socialization of the subject. In short, it is about breaking out of existing social conditions and founding new ones. Unlike his more prominent colleagues Antonio Negri and Franco "Bifo" Berardi, Paolo Virno had no personal relationship with Deleuze and Guattari in the 1980s, nor does he refer explicitly to their concepts or to Foucault's related theories on biopolitics, for example. And yet, the resonances between the various European currents of political philosophy that shaped the late 20th century also find an echo in Virno's central concepts.

The concise final sentence of Virno's first essay on exodus contains such an echo, the "old idea of fleeing in order to be able to attack

better." It was Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari who, in the 1970s, developed the concept of the line of flight and—closely related to this—ideas of an active, constitutive, or productive flight. Taking up a quote from Black Panther activist George Jackson, in *Dialogues,* Deleuze and Claire Parnet state: "It may be that I am fleeing, but throughout my flight, I am searching for a weapon."[2] In this book, written in 1977, they not only refer to the colonization and flight of American settlers toward the West as a geographical line of flight in American literature,[3] but also include references to the Old Testament exodus of the Israelites.[4] All these figures are also discussed in Virno's reflections on the Exodus, scattered over the decades.

Paolo Virno developed his own concept of exodus very early on, drawing directly on the experiences of *the Autonomia* movement in the 1970s. In September 1981, he published the short essay "Il gusto dell'abbondanza"[5] ("The Taste of Abundance"), in which his concept of exodus is already relatively clearly outlined. Starting from an image that Marx had already used to describe the crisis of capitalist accumulation process, namely the desertion of workers from the factory, Virno attempts to interpret the difficulties of implementing capitalism in the USA. Low costs for land ownership, a seemingly inexhaustible reservoir of land, and a situation of abundance enabled the mass exodus from work under wage masters. The subjectively motivated resistance to the capitalist subjugation of labor is, and here the direct line of the operaist tradition becomes tangible, not exclusively a reaction to untenable conditions, but a destabilization of the entire system due to the search for alternatives, due to the flight. The flight does not end in an absence, in a void that can be filled, but in a scenario of *confrontation.* According to Virno, the cult of mobility that emerged in the 1970s, the desire to escape ambiguity, the desertion

from the factory, are nothing more than a reincarnation of this early US crisis of capitalism: "Nomadism, individual liberation, desertion, the feeling of abundance are what generate social conflict today." As early as 1981, Virno concluded his first essay on exodus:

> "Disobedience and flight, however, are not negative gestures that relieve us of action and responsibility. On the contrary. Desertion means changing the conditions under which a conflict unfolds, rather than submitting to them.
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> And the positive creation of a favorable scenario requires greater initiative than the clash with predetermined conditions. An affirmative 'doing' characterizes the falling away that imprints a sensual and operative touch on the present. The conflict begins precisely where we create something in fleeing in order to defend social relations and new ways of life that we are already beginning to experience. Added to the old idea of fleeing in order to be better able to attack is the certainty that the struggle will be all the more effective if we *have something to lose besides our chains*."

Probably Paolo Virno's internationally most widely read text alongside The *Grammar of the Multitude* is "Virtuosity and Revolution," which appeared in Italian in 1994.[6] The relationship between this older text and *Grammar of the Multitude*, published in Italian in 2001, is by no means simply a linear development of an idea. While some longer sections of text were also incorporated into the later text word for word, the earlier text contains some more explicit political formulations. Above all, however, there is a significant shift of perspective: while the more recent text focuses on the widely used concept of the multitude developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the essay published seven years earlier

aims to develop a "political theory of exodus," as the subtitle explicitly states.

In some places where the concept of the multitude appears later, in «Virtuosity and Revolution» we find the concept of *azione politica*, political action or political activity. Virno says here that we need "a model of political action that allows action to feed precisely on what today determines its blockade." But what determines the blockade of political action under today's working and living conditions? According to Virno, it is above all the fact that in post-Fordist production the boundaries of work are blurred both in the direction of political action and in the direction of cognitive cooperation. In a redefinition of political practice, this cognitive cooperation would have to regain its own meaning and break down the "iron intimacy" with production. It would have to become public instead of being absorbed into production: a "public intellect" in the tradition of Marx's "*general intellect*" and the operaist concept of "mass intellectuality," as the fundamental repertoire of a diffuse intelligence, as a score that connects a multiplicity. This public sphere of the intellect, which is developing precisely outside and in opposition to post-Fordist production, should, however, establish itself as a *non-state* public sphere, and it does so in its exodus from obedience to the state.[7]

According to Virno, the multitude, which is not willing to become a state, should give rise to a radically new form of democracy. Virno thus defines exodus primarily as the mass defection from the state, the alliance of "*general intellect*" and political action, the transition to a public sphere of intellect. In this respect, exodus is a form of active withdrawal: an escape that always implies a founding. In "Virtuosity and Revolution", published in the mid-1990s, Virno adds a bundle of categories to his political theory of exodus that, in his view at the time, would help to counter the political crisis at

the end of the 20th century: radical disobedience, excess, multitude, Soviet, example, right of resistance—all terms that then also became characteristic of the global movement that, for lack of a better name, was named the anti-globalization movement.

Another philosophical concept that is becoming increasingly central to Virno's thinking already appears in the above cited quotation from the first Exodus text, namely that of *condition*. Virno asks, in a fundamentally philosophical sense, about the conditions of possibility for political action, referring increasingly to positions in linguistic philosophy, anthropology, and even theory of evolution. The aim is to describe humans as a bundle of *capacities* that have developed in the course of evolutionary history. This distinguishes him quite significantly from French philosophers, but also from many Marxist thinkers. However, Virno's theoretical reflections on language and its incarnation, i.e., its objectification in "human nature,"[8] should not be misunderstood as ahistorical generalizations, as can be seen from his 2005 text "Anthropology and Theory of Institutions."[9] And even here, amid speculations about the uncanny and frightening aspects of "human nature," we encounter the exodus once again. If, according to Virno, we acknowledge that liberating innovation and destruction have the same root, renounce salvation through dialectics and synthesis, and understand the negative as one side of a fundamental ambivalence, then the exodus also represents "a refutation of Carl Schmitt's position: a republic that is no longer organized by the state maintains an extremely close and undisguised relationship with the innate destructiveness of our species." This destructiveness consists precisely in a non-dialectical negativity, which, according to Virno at the same time—through the performative effect of linguistic action—is also capable of instituting a public sphere outside the state apparatus.[10]

Human nature is the focus of attention here primarily because it is nothing other than potentiality, and this potentiality forms the true foundation of every social institution. Anyone who wants to develop a theory of political action and thus of the public sphere must anchor it in the capacity of human language, as well as in our ability to receive and process sensory stimuli and other stimuli from the outside world. In doing so, Virno opens up not only Saussure's linguistic analysis to political analysis on a theoretical level, but also Wittgenstein's attempt to ground the epistemological problems associated with subjective perception and the possibility of expressing feelings in language, which led him to reject the possibility of a private language.

Human actions are always based on conditions, but these conditions are determined by the fact that they undergo historical transformations. What is special about our era is that, unlike any historical phase before it, it allows our pure potentiality—that is, our ability to react to the unforeseen and not only to change our behavior, but also to understand and question its regularity—to flow *directly* into the production process, thus removing the boundaries once drawn between political action and production. The conditions for the possibility of action are therefore no longer the same as before the post-Fordist transformation, when political theory was dominated for centuries by figures who assumed a clear distinction between political action, work, and intellectual reflection.

In Virno's 2005 book *Motto di spirito e azione innovativa* ("Wit and Innovative Action")[11], the theoretical strategy of politicizing linguistic grammar is repeated once again: The book is first and foremost a fundamental examination of the "essence," "structure," and "logic" of the joke, in constant correspondence with the question of the emergence of creativity and innovative action. It

takes as its starting point a linguistic-philosophical reading of Freud's study on jokes, published in 1905. Virno calls this book the most significant attempt to interpret the different types of jokes in a *quasi-botanical* way, and he himself proceeds in much the same way, albeit—again not unlike Deleuze and Guattari—in a strictly anti-Freudian manner.

For Virno, the joke is the diagram[12] of innovative action. Its grammar reflects, as if in miniature, the macrocosmic changes in life forms. In extensive philosophical discussions, primarily on Aristotle, Wittgenstein, and Carl Schmitt, Virno attempts to show that it is precisely the joke that reveals to us that and how our world needs to be changed. And, somewhat surprisingly, after these reflections on, among other things, the difficulty of applying a rule and its relationship to exceptions and states of emergency, he finally returns to two of his well-known figures from earlier writings. In *Motto di spirito e azione innovativa*, these figures first appear as the two basic types of wit. For Virno, the two main forms of wit are the multiple, ambiguous use of terms and idioms and the shifting of meaning. All jokes, like all human endeavors to change their way of life, drawn, according to Virno, *either* from the unusual combination of existing elements *or* from an abrupt deviation. Here, the joke becomes a microcosm in which we experience the unexpected combination and shift in meaning as the basis for changing ways of life. But we also find this basic typology of jokes on a macroscopic level, as innovation and—as exodus.

The resources needed to open up an unexpected escape route from the Egypt of the pharaohs were exactly the same as those that feed jokes: displacement, shift, abrupt deviation from the axis of discourse. On a linguistic level, this strategy means suddenly changing the subject when a conversation is running on rails. In the political arena, it manifests itself as collective defection, as

exodus. Faced with the question of whether to submit to the pharaoh or openly rebel against his rule, the Israelites invent a possibility that no one had anticipated: they flee. The exodus transforms the context in which a problem has arisen, rather than addressing the problem by choosing between predetermined alternatives. According to *Motto di spirito e azione innovativa,* it opens up a side road that is not yet marked on political maps in order to change the very grammar that determines the selection of all conceivable options:

> "Exodus is the transfer of the heuristic procedure that mathematicians call data variation to political practice: by giving priority to secondary or heterogeneous factors, we gradually move away from a specific problem, namely the question: submission or rebellion?, to a completely different problem: How can we realize a movement of defection and at the same time experiment with forms of self-organization that were previously unimaginable?"[13]

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[1] Paolo Virno, *Exodus*, published and translated from the Italian by Klaus Neundlinger and Gerald Raunig, Vienna: Turia+Kant 2006.

[2] Gilles Deleuze / Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, New York: Columbia University 2007 [1977], p. 36. See also the corresponding passages in Gilles Deleuze / Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota 1987 [1980], e.g. p. 110 and 204.

[3] Deleuze / Parnet, Dialogues, p. 38

[4] Deleuze / Parnet, Dialogues, p. 41

[5] Republished under the new title “Dell’Esodo” in the essay collection: Paolo Virno,

Esercizi di esodo. Linguaggio e azione politica, Verona: ombre corte 2002.

[6] “Virtuosismo e rivoluzione,” in: *Mondanità. L’idea de “mondo” tra esperienza sensibile e sfera pubblica*, Rome: manifestolibri 1994, pp. 87–119.

[7] Cf. https://transversal.at/transversal/0605/virno/en.

[8] Cf. Paolo Virno, *Quando il verbo si fa carne. Linguaggio e natura umana*, Turin: Bollati Boinghieri 2003

[9] https://transversal.at/transversal/0407/virno/en. This text is an excerpt from a longer essay: Paolo Virno, “Il cosiddetto ‘male’ e la critica dello Stato,” in: *L’animale pericoloso: natura umana e istituzioni politiche (Forme di vita 4/2005)*, Rome: DeriveApprodi 2005, pp. 9–36.

[10] Virno, *Quando il verbo si fa carne*, pp. 33–74; idem: *Parole con parole. Limiti e poteri del linguaggio,* Rome: Donzelli 1995; idem: “Il significato logico del regresso all’infinito,” in: Rossella Bonito Oliva et al. (eds.) *Paura e immaginazione,* Milan: Mimesis 2007, pp. 231–250.

[11] Paolo Virno, *Motto di spirito e azione innovativa. Per una logica del cambiamento,* Turin: Bollati Boringhieri 2005. The translation of the preface can be found under the title “Wit and Innovation” in the “creativity hypes” issue of the eipcp web journal *transversal:* https://transversal.at/transversal/0207/virno/en.

[12] On the concept of the diagram, see also Paolo Virno, "Diagrammi storico-naturali. Movimento new global e invariante biologico," in: *La natura umana (Forme di vita 1/2004)*, Rome: DeriveApprodi 2004, pp. 104–113.

[13] Virno, *Motto di spirito e azione innovativa*, p. 79 (translated by the authors).