

A Grammar of the Multitude. By Paolo Virno, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson. New York: Semiotext(e), 2004. Pp.xiii + 91.

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In *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Paolo Virno develops his political investigation of contemporary capital through a series of returns, arguing for the uncanny reemergence of what was once repressed as failed and forgotten. The book was published in 2004, a historical moment where massive “anti-capitalist” and “anti-globalization” demonstrations were on a rise, a time where books like Michael Hardt and Toni Negri’s *Empire* (a work Slavoj Žižek praises as “nothing less than a rewriting of *The Communist Manifesto* for our time”) were being received as best-sellers. It might be read as less of a mere coincidence that Virno’s book came out around the same time *Empire*’s sequel, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* appeared on the shelf. Virno and Negri both came from an earlier historical moment, one also filled with social and political fervor, namely the Italian Autonomia labor movement, a leftist radicalism that might be seen as failed and forgotten over time. While Negri—in a time where the American Left was siding with Eurocommunism and considering Autonomia with suspicion—chooses not to make explicit references back to this historical past, Virno does.

By revisiting the radical history of Autonomia, Virno sees it as a defeated revolution to which post-Fordist multitude is a possible answer. In explaining what he means by this philosophical concept of “multitude,” Virno makes another historical return, this time a longer leap into 17th century

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Europe. He zeroes in on an old debate between two competing concepts of “people” and “multitude,” referring to “people” as a Hobbesian political category which is characterized as strictly correlated to the unifying existence of the State, and “multitude” as a Spinozan form of social and political existence for the many to be seen as being many without converging into a One. While the notion of “multitude” was deemed the losing term at that historical moment, Virno argues that its importance reemerges today when conceptualizing possible resistance against contemporary global capital. Stressing how, in the contemporary era, categories of life and production are changing and breaking down, Virno claims that the hegemonic category of “the people” is at the center of this deterritorialization. He stresses that “unity is no longer something (the State, the sovereign) towards which things converge, as in the case of the people; rather, it is taken for granted, as a background or a necessary precondition. We must conceive of a One which, far from being something conclusive, might be thought of as the base which authorizes differentiation or which allows for the political-social existence of the many seen as being many”(25). In other words, for Virno, the One in the contemporary world is no longer the premise of the many, rather it is the premise of the many to be seen as many.

Virno develops his argument on multitude, through a returning investigation of this long-repressed concept and a re-articulation of it in a contemporary context. Adopting the term’s focus on heterogeneity and plurality, Virno aims to see “multitude” as a grammatical subject and seeks to understand it through various philosophical “predicates” derived from different approaches and different authors from different areas of study. First, he takes a political approach, through a return to canonical European thinkers such as Kant, Heidegger, and Marx, discussing the dialectic between fear and security—how it once demanded the many to culminate into the One (be it the State, Citizenship, or the Sovereign), and how it now constitutes the “common concern” of the many to be seen as many. While fear can be seen as once a force that united a people and connected them to the State, Virno claims that in

the contemporary world of global capitalism, there are no substantial communities that can provide security and because so, this “permanent mutability” (33) works as what Marx terms as “general intellect,” a common intellectual ground upon which a “republic of the multitude” (69) can be conceived.

This leads into Virno’s second approach where he focuses on political economy. Revisiting Aristotle’s division of human activity (labor, politics, thought), Virno remaps this division through his concept of “virtuosity” (art, work, speech). He draws an analogy between virtuosity and politics, pointing to how they can be conceived as political because they all need an audience, a public space to operate, and a common language to communicate; explaining also how they can both be seen as performance because they find fulfillment in themselves, rather than in an externalized telos. With this analogy, Virno argues for a growing breaking down and hybridization of these divisions in contemporary capital, a political economy which instead of producing the One, now focuses on immaterial labor, where cooperation, collaboration, and communication amongst the many become crucial.

The third approach Virno uses is an experiential one which discusses the subjective experience of the multitude by the many-as-many. The underlying question that pushes for this discussion might be seen as—if multitude signifies plurality and not a cohesive unity of people, how can these subjectivities of the many-as-many be investigated and mobilized as such? In response to this question, he once again returns to earlier western philosophies such as Gilbert Simondon’s notion of individuation, and Michael Foucault’s concept of “biopolitics,” in exploring possible avenues to conceptualize individual subjectivities alongside the notion of the many.

For a work that relies so heavily on epistemic returns or “remembering,” *Grammar* seems to me as somehow ironically forgetting much of present day realities. While Virno constantly alludes to earlier

historical and philosophical moments in tracing a possible grammar in conceptualizing and resisting contemporary *global* capital, both the historical and philosophical instances he returns to can be seen as deeply European based. Questions therefore arise—precisely what kind of language is being derived from Virno’s philosophical grammar? Though he claims to enunciate this language on a global scale, bearing global concerns, with whom is he really in dialogue? Also, judging from how this grammar appears to be heavily area-based, have we as contemporary subjects (taking Virno himself as an example), who according to his argument should be living in and depending on “permanent mutability,” really moved on and rid ourselves from geo-political entailments?

Another way of approaching these questions is to ask: whose “contemporary global capital” is the author really enunciating? While Virno claims to be arguing for a language that incorporates and conceptualizes the many in a globalizing contemporary, I argue that this “contemporary” he has in mind is a technology-based capitalism where free-flowing immaterial communication rather than nation-based material production are at the forefront; an aspect of the world social system that is ironically not shared by the many. For example, while China is often argued as being a “rising global superpower” in the “contemporary” world its society, on top of a large population that might not all have internet access, it nonetheless possesses one of the most sophisticated and ambitious government-based internet censorship programs.

It could be argued that the questions I’ve raised above are responded to in Sylvere Lotringer’s foreword. He seems to be defending Virno’s romanticized conception of multitude by stating:

One of the virtues of *Autonomia* is that it was never afraid of claiming out loud: “We are the front of luxury.”...The idea of a multitude...is a luxury that we should be able to afford: the luxury of imagining a

future that would actively bring together everything we are capable of.
(17)

Yet, I would still have to voice my skepticism and ask—what and whose present is at stake in this re-imagining of a future of “the many”? Who is being left out in order for the imaginary “many” to come together and be conceived as such? While Virno claims to be speaking about and for a global contemporary where being international is no longer a choice, those who have a luxury of imagining it as such might still need to take the time to remember what and who they might be forgetting.

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